

**COLONS**

AND

**COMMAS**

AND

**DASHES**

**OH, MY!**

**AMERICAN GRAMMAR & USAGE TIPS**



***Grammar Goddess Communication***

**Do you look and sound as smart as you are?**

Dear Reader:

Thanks so much for asking for this free booklet on American punctuation and usage! I hope you find it helpful as a reminder of some of the basics in this particular system, even if the system you follow is not the American one. I have included as many examples as I could to show you how to use some of the rules that you may have forgotten about over time.

**Reality check:** Please remember that some punctuation rules don't make a lot of sense (especially the one on using a colon to set up a list in a sentence as shown on page 1), yet they're still the standard we're supposed to follow. But if you're having trouble with anyone over a punctuation mark and you can't persuade that person to follow the accepted standard, you might not want to fight the battle, especially if the usage won't confuse or embarrass anyone.

In the Vocabulary/Usage section on page 5, notice that one word—*alot*—isn't a **real** word, although *irregardless* (page 6) is.

A lot of writers use *alot*, even though any good spellcheck program will automatically separate it into the two words. I'll bet more than a few writers override their spell-checker when that happens, certain that the program just goofed.

Oops. No, it didn't. There is no such word as *alot*.

But *irregardless* **is** a real word and is found in most dictionaries. The definition usually says it's "not a **standard** word." So while it's real, using it will not enhance your professional reputation. Use *regardless* instead.

I hope this booklet helps to remind you and anyone else that we still do have a few rules left in the American grammar system, and it's a good idea to know them if you're writing to impress your reader(s).

Enjoy!

*Susan*

Susan Rooks  
The Grammar Goddess



PS: If you spot a typo, please let me know!

## Apostrophes (')

To place an apostrophe correctly in a possessive phrase, turn the two-word phrase around and insert *of* or *of the* between the words to see if the first word of the original phrase is singular or plural.

If the word is singular, add 's.

**IF** dogs ears = ears of the dog = dog's ears

If the word is a regular plural ending in *s*, add only an apostrophe.

**IF** dogs ears = ears of the dogs = dogs' ears

If the word is an irregular plural (e.g., men, women, children, people), add 's

mens / womens room = room of the men / women = men's / women's room

the choice of the people = the people's choice \*\* toys of the children = the children's toys

**DO NOT USE AN APOSTROPHE TO CREATE REGULAR PLURALS.**

## Colons (:)

There must be a complete sentence before the colon when introducing a list within a sentence. Do not put a colon after any word that would not logically end a sentence, such as you see below in red.

YES: Megan needs several things for her party: food, music, and friends.

YES: Megan needs several things for her party including food, music, and friends.

**NO:** Megan needs several things for her party **including**: food, music, and friends.

**NO:** The set consists **of**: knives, forks, and spoons.

## Commas (,)

Connect two complete sentences with a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet*) **and** a comma, or a semicolon alone (but never just a comma alone, because that's the comma splice). You can remember the coordinating conjunction list with the acronym **FANBOYS**.

YES: Sheila likes beef, but Sarah prefers fish.

YES: Sheila likes beef; Sarah prefers fish.

**NO:** Sheila likes **beef, Sarah** prefers fish.

Form the habit of using the Oxford (serial) comma before the final "and" or "or" in a series **for clarity**, even though it is no longer required. The habit will save you in any sentence where you REALLY need it.

We have openings for a receptionist, mail handler, clerk and statistical typist.

We have openings for a receptionist, mail handler, clerk, and statistical typist.

I invited my parents, Superman and Wonder Woman. (Really? They're your parents? I invited my parents, Superman, and Wonder Woman.



## Dashes (-- or —)

Use dashes—either two hyphens side by side (not just one) or the longer “em” mark—for emphasis, but use them sparingly, especially in business writing. The American version puts no space around them; the British version does put space around them. Be consistent in any single document with your choice.

## Ellipsis Marks (. . . or ...)

Use an ellipsis mark (plural: ellipses) when omitting a word, phrase, paragraph, line, or more from a quoted passage, or when a thought trails off. The periods used to be spaced, with a space before and after; now, it's acceptable to join them, still with a space before and after. **Please use sparingly in professional writing.**

Rod admitted . . . he'd also been drinking a lot.  
There's just something about her ...

## Hyphens (-)

Use a hyphen in compound numbers when you write them out. The first is twenty-one and the last is ninety-nine.

Use hyphens to connect **all the words** in multi-word phrases that come right before a noun and act as compound adjectives. When we use these phrases elsewhere, we **usually** drop the hyphens (but see two exceptions below).

### As Compound Adjective

up-to-date figures  
state-of-the-art plan  
high-level meeting  
long-term loan  
follow-up letters  
9-year-old child  
back-to-school specials

### Regular Form

figures are **up to date**  
plan is **state of the art**  
meeting at a **high level**  
loan is for a **long term**  
let's **follow up** later  
she's **9 years old**  
going **back to school**

### As Compound Noun

a follow-up  
a 9-year-old

## Parentheses ( )

Enclose nonessential information, stuff that can be left out without major loss of understanding, with parentheses (sometimes). But because they're so big, they draw attention to themselves and what they enclose. Most of the time, use a comma where each half of the ( ) would be.

**BUT:** Use parentheses, rather than commas, if using just commas might be confusing.

John, my husband, Aileen, and I will attend.  
John (my husband), Aileen, and I will attend.



# Pronouns

To choose a pronoun correctly, you can often just ignore the other people in the sentence and focus on the pronoun alone.

Dustin asked Art and (me / I / myself) to go.

Remove *Art*: Dustin asked me to go.

Therefore: Dustin asked Art and me to go.

Either Ketzirah or (myself / I / me) will call you.

Remove *Ketzirah*: I will call you.

Therefore: Either Ketzirah or I will call you.

(She / Her) and her mother went out.

Remove *and her mother*: She went out.

Therefore: She and her mother went out.

Reflexive “self” pronouns **must** be the same person as the subject of the sentence or clause (think mirror image), and they can **never** be the first word of a sentence.

Lynn talks to (her / herself) all the time.

Whom does Lynn talk to? Herself or someone else?

**IF SELF**: Lynn talks to herself all the time.

**IF NOT**: Lynn talks to her (another female) all the time.

Neil saw (himself / him) in the mirror.

Whom did Neil see? Himself or another male?

**IF SELF**: Neil saw himself in the mirror.

**IF NOT**: Neil saw him (another male) in the mirror.



**FYI**: **Never** start a sentence with *him*, *me*, *them*, *us*, or any of the “self” pronouns.

## **Who and whom:**

*Who* and *whom* follow the basic pronoun rules: *Who* is always the subject of a sentence or a verb, and *whom* is always the object of a verb or a preposition.

Here’s how you know which to use:

1. Always start with the clause **following** (containing) *who* or *whom*.
2. First, try a simple substitution: *he* for *who* and *him* for *whom*.
3. If you need to, rewrite the sentence, still **starting with the clause that follows** *who* or *whom*, to see which pronoun to use.

1. May I tell her (**who/whom**) is calling? (**He** is calling.)
2. You may vote for (whoever/**whomever**) you wish. (You wish you may vote for **him**.)
3. You may vote for (**whoever/whomever**) appeals to you. (**He** appeals to you.)
4. (Who/**Whom**) were you talking to? (Technically correct [Were you talking to **him**?], but terrible in conversations.) In ordinary discussions, use “who.”



# Quotation Marks (“ ”) The American Way



Always place periods and commas **before / inside / in front of** final quotation marks, even if you’re only quoting the last word(s) in a sentence. Yes, it looks odd to many. But it’s our rule, and we’re stuck with it.

Liz called Carlo a “geek.”

Always place colons and semicolons **after / outside / behind** final quotation marks.

These are my “comfort foods”: chocolate and cookies.  
Beth likes “chick flicks”; Sandy doesn’t.

Place a question mark or an exclamation point before final quotation marks **if** the quoted words were said with special emphasis; if they were not, place the question mark or exclamation point after.

I can’t believe Anne said “don’t worry”!  
Dan screamed “No!”  
Did Laura mean “foul” or “fowl”?  
Was it really Michelle who yelled “foul?”

Always place single quotation marks inside doubles; do not use singles alone. And yes: The period or comma goes inside both of the final quotation marks, which also have a space between them.

“Do. Or do not. There is no ‘try.’ ” Yoda (*The Empire Strikes Back*)

## Semicolons (;)

**Compound sentences:** Use a semicolon to connect two separate sentences.

Sheila likes beef; Sarah prefers fish.

**Items in a complex series:** A complex series already contains required commas, so we use a semicolon to separate the internal sections. Think of the semicolon as an “internal traffic cop”; it’s not an end mark of punctuation, but within a sentence of this type it shows that a section is finished.

### Who is who?

Please invite the Chairman, Ann Murphy, the Executive Vice President, Sam Smith, the Director of Investor Relations, and Penny Roll, the Chief Financial Officer.

### Any easier?

Please invite the Chairman; Ann Murphy, the Executive Vice President; Sam Smith, the Director of Investor Relations; and Penny Roll, the Chief Financial Officer.



## Semicolons, cont'd.

**Transitional expressions:** If you link two sentences with terms such as *however*, *for example*, *moreover*, *namely*, *nevertheless*, or *therefore*, **replace** the period of the first sentence with a semicolon.

We'll go to the movie. However, we'll wait until the 9 p.m. show.

We'll go to the movie; **however**, we'll wait until the 9 p.m. show.

## Subject-Verb Agreement

Singular subjects take singular verbs, even when a plural phrase comes between them.

An order for some new books has been prepared.

A group of teachers was late.

One out of every three teams was eliminated.

Plural subjects take plural verbs.

YES: Two umpires are needed, but only one is here.

**NO: There's** (there is) a million crows out there!

YES: There are a million crows out there! (A million crows are out there!)

## Usage / Vocabulary

**A:** Use *a* before a word beginning with a consonant **sound**.

a master's degree, a euro, a house, a unicorn, a Ladies' PGA event

**An:** Use *an* before a word beginning with a vowel **sound**.

an MBA, an exciting day, an hour, an upset, an LPGA event

**Affect:** Usually a verb meaning *to influence*

(can be a noun meaning someone's emotional state)

**Effect:** Usually a noun meaning *the result*

(can be a verb meaning *to cause*)

**A lot:** Frequently; often; many

**Allot:** To distribute shares

**Alot:** **NOT A REAL WORD**

Use *a little* to  
remember *a lot*.

**Bad:** Adjective following *to feel*

**Badly:** Adverb following other verbs

I feel / felt so bad about her car!

I slept badly last night.

It's sad to feel bad!

**Compose:** To make up

The company is composed of (is made up of) five divisions.

Five divisions compose (make up) the company.

**Comprise:** To include; to contain; to consist of

The company comprises (includes / contains / consists of) five divisions.

**DO NOT USE "is comprised of."**

**Remember**

**Affect**

**Verb**

**Effect**

**Noun**



**Every day:** Each day (We go to work every day.)

**Everyday:** Ordinary; normal (Work is an everyday event.)

**Home (in):** To draw close to a destination

**Hone:** To sharpen skills

**Irregardless:** **NOT A STANDARD WORD; do not use.**

**Regardless:** In spite of; despite

**Its:** Possessive pronoun (The cat hurt its paw.)

**It's:** The contraction of *it is* or *it has* (It's been fun talking with you.)

**Its':** **NOT A REAL WORD**

The goose is loose!



Lose lost an "o."

**Loose:** Not secured

**Lose:** To get rid of; to misplace

**Passed:** The past tense of *to pass* (I passed her on the street.)

**Past:** Previously; earlier (in the past)

**Peak:** The highest part; the top

**Peek:** To look at quickly or secretly

**Pique:** To arouse someone's interest (it piqued my interest)

**Piqué:** A firmly woven cotton fabric

**Principal:** The most important or highest ranking; an amount of money

**Principle:** A fundamental truth

**Their:** The possessive pronoun (their books)

**There:** A place (over there)

**They're:** The contraction of *they are* (They're reading their books over there.)

**To:** The preposition (go to the house)

**Too:** Also; to a degree (too many)

**Two:** The number after one

**Yore:** The distant past (days of yore)

**Your:** The possessive pronoun (It's your book.)

**You're:** The contraction of *you are* (You're reading your book.)

**Who's:** The contraction of *who is* (Who's coming to the party?)

**Whose:** The possessive pronoun (Whose book is that?)

# *Grammar Goddess Communication*

Look and sound as smart as you are.

## Susan Rooks

**“You only get one chance to make a great first impression.”**

I formed **Grammar Goddess Communication** over 20 years ago to offer corporate workshops in three areas: American grammar, business writing, and interpersonal skills. The workshops are just three hours each, and each program can be tailored to meet specific needs of any company or industry. The workbooks are not preprinted, so they can be tailored to a client’s needs.

But over the last few years, as the idea of blogging exploded across the Internet, I broadened my focus and added editing and copy editing services for any type of written materials such as blogs, web content, brochures, business plans, résumés, books, or even annual reports.

Many writers are experts in their fields, and we can all learn a lot from reading their articles. But not everyone is a grammar expert, and a poorly written document can make the writer look unprofessional.

That’s where I come in, checking to see if the punctuation and words are used correctly, if any words are missing, if the bolding / italicizing / underlining are used in a consistent way, if there are sensible segues between paragraphs, and if the physical setup looks professional.

If you would like more information about me and what you can expect from my services, please visit my website. There are over 400 blog posts there, all categorized, as well some “Help” pages.

I would love to connect with you on any of the following online platforms:

LinkedIn, Medium, and Twitter

For any questions, please contact me as shown below:

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