

The Grammar: answers to questions

1. What grammar books would you recommend to a non-English speaker?

A good first move would be to download Patricia Ellman's free ebook, **English Grammar for Economics and Business**. I've provided a link on the resources list. From there, take a look at the other grammar books on the list. John Eastwood's book is among the best.

As well as grammar, think about usage. The best guide is Burchfield (on the resource list).

And don't forget all the online guides. You'll find much excellent material on the web.

2. What is the difference between 'will' and 'shall' in a sentence?

The simplest answer is that the rules governing the use of *shall* and *will* are now more or less forgotten by modern speakers of English. Broadly speaking, *shall* is slowly disappearing in favour of *will*. In many cases, of course, we use contractions – for example, *I'll* or *they'll* – which means that the words more or less disappear altogether.

When writing, *will* probably works best in almost all cases.

Shall survives in some formulaic phrases. For example:

One critic, who shall remain nameless,...
Shall we dance?

The word *shall* is particularly common in legal or contractual documents. For example:

The company shall abide by all contractual obligations...

(Some authorities have challenged the use of *shall* in these circumstances as ambiguous. The word *must* is certainly clearer.)

If you want to know the more formal rules, read on.

Traditionally, the distinction between the two words is between the simple future – an expression of what will happen – and determination or insistence.

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For the first person – *I* or *we* – the word *shall* expresses the simple future, and *will* expresses determination or insistence.

Thus: *I shall go to the meeting at one o'clock.* [the simple future]
I will go to the meeting – and nobody shall stop me! [determination]

For the second and third persons – *you; he, she, it; they* – the rule is exactly reversed.

Thus:

She will go to the meeting at one o'clock. [simple future]
You shall go to the meeting – and if you don't, there'll be trouble! [insistence]

You can see why people have forgotten these rules. They are simply too complicated for most people to understand, let alone remember.

Be aware, also, that *shall* is now extremely rare among English speakers outside the UK.

We can also use the verb *to be going to*. For example:

I'm going to attend the meeting on Monday.
She's going to speak to her manager about it soon.

3. I always get confused when using the words 'either...or' and 'neither...nor'. Could you show us a few examples of how to use these words?

Either ... or distinguishes two (and only two) possibilities. The construction can govern verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, or prepositions.

We can either cross the road or use the subway.
We can use either the pedestrian crossing or the subway.
He had chosen not to call either Maddy or Jennifer.
We can be either brave or cautious.
You can work either slowly and carefully, or quickly and recklessly.
They could work either in the house or outside it.

Either means 'one of two'. It's important to place *either* and *or* in exactly the right places: next to the items being compared. This, for example, is not good:

I think I'll either go to Paris or Barcelona for my holiday this year.

Instead, we should say:

I think I'll go either to Paris or to Barcelona for my holiday this year.

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To use the construction for more than two items is common but perhaps not very good English. I would hesitate to write:

We can use either the bus, or the train, or the tram.

In that sentence, I would simply cut the word *either*.

If *either ... or* governs the main verb of a clause, then the verb should be singular.

Either Chris or Vikram is making the presentation.

Everything that applies to *either ... or* applies equally to *neither ... nor*.

The words *either* and *neither* are used in other ways. To explain about all of those would extend this note far too much. I refer you to Burchfield.

4. The word 'as' makes a sentence longer. But it also adds sense to a sentence. How should it be used?

Well: in many, many different ways! The most common question about *as* probably revolves around its use as a conjunction. It can mean *at the same time as* or *because*.

He was still writing the report as the plane landed.

We have no detailed sales figures as the files containing the data were all destroyed.

Both uses are correct. I would nearly always substitute the word *because* when the meaning demands it, to avoid ambiguity.

Other uses of *as* include the following.

He is as tall as me.

They consulted him as well as me.

I hear that you're employed as a PA these days.

In that third usage, take care to make sense. This next example creates what Burchfield calls 'a false antecedent'.

As an experienced PA, we are sending you an invitation to our global conference.

We are not the experienced PA. The subject of the *as* construction should be the same as the subject of the main clause.

As an experienced PA, you have been chosen to receive a free invitation to our global conference.

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5. Please could you explain the correct use of 'would' and 'could' in a sentence?

Would and *could* are basically the past tense of *will* and *can*, respectively.

He will go swimming every week.

He would go swimming every week.

They can work on both projects at the same time.

They could work on both projects at the same time.

[or: *They were able to work on both projects at the same time.*]

They also act as conditionals of these modal verbs. As conditionals, *would* expresses the possibility of something happening in the future. *Could* as a conditional expresses the possibility of being able to do something in the future.

Because both forms of the verbs express possibility, they normally appear in constructions followed by an *if* clause. The most common instances use *would* before *could*, for logical reasons.

Thus:

I would sign the contract if I could see a good reason for doing so.

In more formal constructions, the traditional distinction between *shall* and *will* transfers to *should* and *would*. A very formal letter, therefore, might include something like this.

I should be most grateful if you could complete the form and return it to the above address.

On the whole, it's a good idea to avoid such formal constructions in business letters. Instead, write something like:

Please complete the form and return it to the above address.

As so often, be guided by the way you speak.

6. Please could you explain the deployment of this technique in the exam?

This is actually a very good, and rather difficult, question. I assume that by 'this technique', you are referring to the technique I outlined in the webinar of writing 'as you speak' and then editing. Editing your work is difficult in an exam; time is short and you are not able to delete, revise and rewrite easily on an exam paper.

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I think the best answer must be to answer specimen questions before the exam. Doing so gives you the opportunity to practise some of the techniques I've been discussing.

As you practise, spend some time making notes before committing them to the exam paper.

Begin by noting or mapping your thoughts about everything you want to include in your answer. Remember that, in most cases, you are answering a question: you must concentrate in doing that, rather than simply writing everything you know about a given topic.

Once you have outlined the shape of your argument or explanation, try to write the main points of that argument or explanation as topic sentences. Write those sentences down and improve them before committing them to the exam paper. That gives you a framework on which to write your text. Then build paragraphs to support those topic sentences. As you write, get into the habit of 'speaking' each sentence in your head before you start writing it. You will need to do some mental editing *before* writing, rather than enjoying the luxury of deleting and rewriting the text itself.

Once you have written the answer, try to take a little time to improve one or two sentences: maybe the longest or most complicated sentences you have written. You will be working to a tight deadline, and you should not devote too much time to this kind of editing.

Check also whether the examination board has any guidelines or rules about rewriting or changing your first draft text.

Take a look at my ebook, *How to Write an Essay*. It is not specifically about answering exam questions, but the techniques outlined in that book do apply quite well to examinations.

7. I have improved my grammar by reading novels. Do you have any recommendations that would help?

The best books for this kind of work are books that (a) you enjoy, and (b) that are well written. Without knowing you, it would be hard for me to recommend anything other than what I enjoy!

This is a great site for finding new books to read. You can tell the site what you enjoy and then find other titles which might be of interest.

www.goodreads.com

(You need to list 20 books that you enjoy.)

Of course, you could do something similar on a site such as Amazon.

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If you are interested in using books to improve your English, I recommend reading more modern authors, if only because writers from (say) before about 1910 will often use slightly old-fashioned language.

Now, if you really are asking me for some ideas, here's a little list of authors that might be of interest. It is intensely personal. I have chosen writers whose prose is not too difficult, but who produce consistently fine work. I have listed novelists only. Check out short stories as well as novels. Many of the authors in my list have written short stories (and, indeed, essays).

In no particular order, then:

Graham Greene
Ernest Hemingway
George Orwell
Ursula Le Guin
Michael Frayn
F Scott Fitzgerald
Harper Lee
Donna Leon
Ray Bradbury
Margaret Atwood
Zadie Smith

8. How about sub-headings and headings, is it supposed to be that they all begin with a capital letter is better?

Yes.

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The Grammar: books, ebooks and other resources

Books

Improve your Communication Skills (revised 2nd edition)	Alan Barker	Kogan Page 2010
Oxford Guide to English Grammar	John Eastwood	Oxford 1994
English Grammar in Steps (with answers)	David Bolton and Noel Goodey	Richmond Publishing 1996
The New Fowler's Modern English Usage	Ed. R W Burchfield	Oxford 1996
The Plain English Guide	Martin Cutts	Oxford 1995
Practical English Usage	Michael Swan	Oxford University Press, 2 nd edition, 1995
Style: toward clarity and grace	Joseph M Williams	University of Chicago Press, 1995

Ebooks

How to Write an Essay	Alan Barker	Bookboon, 2013 http://bookboon.com/en/search?q=how+to+write+an+essay
English Grammar for Economics and Business	Patricia Ellman	Bookboon, 2014 http://bookboon.com/en/english-grammar-for-economics-and-business-ebook

(Includes the best guide I've found to the use of articles: *the, a, an*)

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Websites

You can find a wealth of information on grammar and writing skills online. Here's a three-part strategy.

First, catch your OWL.

Many US colleges and universities host exceptional online writing labs, or OWLs. The instructional materials and quizzes available at these sites are generally suitable for writers of all ages and at all academic levels. Here are four of the very best. They are all free to access.

[The OWL at Purdue University](#)

One of the most long-established and possibly the very best OWL. Mostly instructional information.

[Guide to Grammar and Writing \(Capital Community College\)](#)

A complete writing course online. Lots of quizzes and tests.

[Writing@CSU \(Colorado State University\)](#)

A wide range of resources, including a great deal about how to write different kinds of document.

[HyperGrammar \(Writing Centre at the University of Ottawa in Canada\)](#)

Another excellent grammar course.

Second, find your style guides.

You'll need a style guide to help you deal with the ever-changing landscape of written English, especially in your chosen field.

Your own organization may have an in-house style guide. If so, keep it close by and refer to it whenever you need to.

Among public style guides, I regard these two as among the best available. I suggest you bookmark both.

[The Economist Style Guide](#)

[Guardian Style](#)

If you want to go further, check out [Richard Nordquist's](#) posts on About.com.

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Third, invest in a dictionary.

The best dictionary of the English language, of course, is the [Oxford English Dictionary](#). Nearly all UK citizens can subscribe to the OED free if they have a public library card. Outside the UK, many public, university and institutional libraries also subscribe. You may well be able to use a library card or institutional subscription to access the dictionary free. A full individual subscription to the OED can be expensive.

The most highly respected American dictionary is probably [Merriam-Webster](#). The online version is free and very popular. Bear in mind that the OED includes a great many references to American usage – as well as usage in other English-speaking communities – so the OED is probably the only dictionary you would ever need.

If you want a book dictionary, these are among the best available.

[Oxford Dictionary of English](#)

[The Chambers Dictionary](#)

And finally:

This site is an extremely useful resource if you want to check how words and phrases are used in various contexts.

<http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/>

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