

The Proof Angel Summary of

Grammar & usage: June 2014

There, Their, They're

These three words are the cause of much grief, but it is simple to check whether you have the right one.

The theory

- **Their** shows ownership. Their house, their story. Sometimes if there are more than one owner use theirs, eg that version of the story is theirs.
- **There** is an adverb indicating place, such as the book is there. **There** is a place just like **here**, which is in the word to remind us. **There's** is a short version of there is.
- **They're** is a shortened form of **they are**.

The test

Simply make a substitution & see if you still have a sensible sentence. If you do, you have the correct form:

- If you have written **there**, substitute **here**. Example: Over there is a blue one.
- If you have written **their**, substitute **our**. Example: Their car is blue.
- If you have written **they're**, substitute **they are**. Example: They're the blue ones.

So if you'd written:

- They're car is blue.

To test it you would substitute they are, resulting in:

- They are car is blue.

Which makes no sense.



The Proof Angel is the trading name of Sarah Perkins, freelance editor and proofreader.

And of course the title of this post is the punchline of an old joke. How do you annoy a grammar pedant? Say ...

How we learn grammar

A study of [how we learn grammar](#) has concluded that the different grammatical structures found in languages of the world reflect the deep properties of human minds rather than social and cultural factors.

Irregular plurals

Sometimes forming the plural is not as easy as just adding an s. To help with those times, here is [a nice infographic](#) to guide you through the problem.

What is grammar?

Grammar has come to be used as a general word for rules about how language works. Often it is used to mean anything other than spelling.

Most of the time that is a perfectly reasonable compromise. Most people know what you mean. I've noticed that when words like syntax are mentioned, the atmosphere changes. Some people don't really know what is meant, & are uncomfortable. Others have a nasty feeling that if this conversation goes on much longer, they will be out of their depth.

If we can make it easier to sort out whatever needs fixing, surely it can't be that important if we are a bit woolly about one word while we do it?

From time to time, that isn't really good enough. For those rare occasions, here is a [post to help](#).

The sanity of plain language

I like a good post about using plain English.

I particularly hate the use of complicated words because people think it sounds clever.

So [I like this post](#).

How to use the different sorts of dashes

Here is a quick summary of how to use the 3 different [types of dashes](#). Just so we are all clear what they look like:

- Hyphen: short & fat.
- En dash: about twice as long & thinner, named because it is the same width as the letter N.
- Em dash: twice as long again, and named after the letter M due to its width.

Hopefully?

Be careful with this one if you want to please the pedants.

Most of us use the word to mean we hope it will be OK. For example "Hopefully I'll catch the last bus". The word has been in use this way for a very long time. Some people still insist it means full of hope, so they would interpret the example to mean I was planning to board the bus with a positive attitude. Perhaps I think this time there will be fewer drunken idiots. Most of us would mean we don't want the alternative of a long walk.

So the message is simple. If you want to be sure you aren't making the purists tut, hopefully is a word to avoid.

Splitting Long Sentences

Long sentences are bad. They make it harder to read, and increase the chance of misunderstandings. Many of us write long sentences in the first draft. We are focusing on getting the information out of our head rather than making it look good. The theory is that the problems in the first draft don't matter, because you are then going to revise the piece.

The problem is that it can be hard to revise your own writing. Sometimes you put so much effort into that long sentence that you just can't see how to do it any other way. Fortunately, there are some signposts for places to make that split.

Co-ordinating conjunctions

Words like and, but, for, nor, or, so, & yet connect:

- Two independent clauses, each of which can stand alone, with its own subject and verb, or
- An independent clause and a dependent clause. They often link or contrast two separate ideas or actions. This means they serve as a natural break between the parts of a sentence.

The conjunction signals a good place to split into 2 sentences, for example:

- You can be perfectly well with HIV, **but** at other times it's hard to do even basic things.

Becomes:

- You can be perfectly well with HIV. At other times it's hard to do even basic things.

Sometimes you will need to use a transitional word or phrase at the split point:

- You will be asked to complete an application form **and** subsequently to attend a training course one evening a week for six weeks.

Becomes:

- You will be asked to complete an application form. **Later**, you will attend a training course one evening a week for six weeks.

Which

This word is used to add a non-restrictive element to a sentence. As it is not critical to the sentence's meaning, you could move it into a new sentence. You may need a demonstrative pronoun to clarifying the connection between the two resultant sentences. Reminding your reader of the subject in the second sentence may also minimize ambiguity.

- Amnesty also has its own checks **which** ensure that all its major reports pass through several levels of approval.

Becomes:

- Amnesty also has its own checks. **These** ensure that all its major reports pass through several levels of approval.

Participial phrases

Phrases beginning with a verb form ending in "-ing", functioning as an adjective can be a useful sign. When these phrases occur at the end of a sentence, they often provide non-essential information. That gives scope for it to stand alone in a separate sentence, often beginning with a pronoun to give the second sentence a clear subject.

- These are now due to occur in 2016, **having** been postponed on several occasions over the past few years.
- These are now due to occur in 2016. **They** were postponed on several occasions over the past few years

Some sentences need more than one of these strategies. Remember that if the new sentences generated by these techniques are closely related, you may want to demonstrate that link by using a semicolon instead of a full stop to emphasize the link.

Confused about each other and one another?

This is a question of quantity.

Each other refers to 2 people or things. **One another** refers to more than 2.

So the two candidates who were in the final congratulated **each other**, while the others went to the bar to commiserate with **one another**.

So what is the Oxford comma?

Do you know what is meant by the Oxford or serial comma? If you don't, or you want to know why people get so excited about it, [try this short video](#).

Confused about between and among?

Between should be used when there are two things or people. Among is for when there are more.

For example, *between* you and me there is no way we are going to split the credit *among* all the people who made this show happen.

Each of these words contain a crucial letter to help you remember the difference.

Be**T**ween is for two, but a**M**ong is for many.

Are grammar books important?

My bet is that most of us don't pay any attention at all to grammar books, unless we have to for some reason.

So are they important? This study looks at how grammar books [influence the language](#).

Confused about discrete and discreet

These 2 words both come from Latin roots:

- Discreet comes from discernere, to discern. It means tactful, or unobtrusive.
- Discrete comes from discretus, separated. It has the same meaning in English, or it can mean distinct.

So the confusion has been going on since Roman times. Remember the difference with this phrase:

The island of *Crete* is a *discrete* part of Greece.

Sorting out your pronouns

A lot of us get confused about whether to use I or me. It is one of those things where the underlying idea is easy. I am the subject of the sentence, but the object is me. Somehow putting it into use is much harder.

This [post will help](#).

Confused about farther and further?

FARther relates to measurable distance: it shows how **FAR** you have to go.

Further is more metaphorical. Often you could substitute "another" without changing the sense.

Before we walk any farther we ought to have a further discussion about where we are stopping to eat.

Any parents please stop muttering about Father going the distance. That is just confusing the issue.

What is verb agreement?

Verb agreement is a concept that troubles many people. Somehow it is easier to get to grips with the idea in other languages, for example in French when we need to make an adjective agree with a noun by making it feminine.

Brush up on [making the verb agree](#) with the subject. Details matter.

Advice v advise

Do you get confused about advice & advise? [Try this post](#) from Oxford Dictionaries.

Less or fewer?

This issue leads to great excitement in some quarters. When should you use "less" & when should it be fewer?

As this post explains, the difference is mainly down to [whether the noun is countable](#). That is fine in theory, but many of us find it hard to do the analysis while we are mid sentence. Some forms of multi tasking are harder than others.

I have a little voice in my head saying:

- Less cake, fewer biscuits.

I find that the easiest way to remember, but I still hear myself getting it wrong in speech.

How to use who and whom

Apparently, when a man uses "whom" on his dating site profile, he gets 31% more contacts. Women see it as a sign of intelligence.

I can't find any statistics to prove whether the grammar needs to be correct to get the results, or whether men just need to drop the word in somewhere.

Anyway, back to the point. This post explains [how to work this one out](#). If you get confused by terms like subject & object, just keep ploughing on. Help is at hand.

The origins of norm

This word has surprising roots. Well it surprised me, anyway. [Read all about it here](#).

Will UK legislation ever be in plain language?

We are all told how important it is to keep our audience in mind when we write. This is one of those pieces of advice that is easier said than done. There are two main problems:

- How do you know who the audience is, and
- How do you know what they will understand.

Here is a rather sad piece about the [people who draft UK legislation](#). They have been making a big effort to make things understandable, but research shows that there is still a long way to go.

The size of the problem is summed up in one sentence from Alison Bertlin, who said:

It would be difficult to overstate the profound sense of realisation with which drafters observing the user testing sessions came to recognise the difficulties that ordinary readers have in reading ordinary legislation.

We can all see this is a long winded way of saying:

We are surprised that people find our work so hard to follow.

Readability measures can only ever be a guide, but here are a few to show just how bad this sentence is:

- It is a 32 word sentence. The Plain English Campaign recommends an average of 15 to 20 words.
- The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score is 19.7. This means someone in the 20th Grade of the US school system will be able to understand it easily. I don't know much about US schools, but my guess is the 20th grade doesn't exist. As a rough guide, adding 7 to this statistic gives the reading age. Let's just say the average reading age in the UK is around 13, & move on.
- The Flesch-reading ease statistic is 10.4. This test rates text on a 100-point scale. The higher the score, the easier it is to understand the document. For most standard files, you want the score to be between 60 and 70.

So how does my translation rate? It is 12 words, with a Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score of 3.8, and a Flesch-reading ease statistic of 88.9.

Is texting bad for children?

Now I suspect this is a hornets' nest, but here we go anyway...

New research at the University of Tasmania and Coventry University has found that [texting doesn't harm grammar & spelling](#). I just thought you should know.