A: General questions about grammar

What counts as grammar? And how is grammar learned? These, and related, issues really need to be addressed before we look at specific areas of grammar. So in this section we address some of these big questions.

1   **What counts as grammar?**
2   **Does English have a lot of grammar?**
3   **What is prescriptive grammar?**
4   **Are British and American grammars really different?**
5   **Is there a difference between written and spoken grammar?**
6   **Is grammar learned in a set order?**
7   **How is grammar best taught?**
8   **What is the point of rules?**
9   **Is there grammar beyond the sentence?**
10   **Is there a core grammar?**

1   What counts as grammar?

What are we talking about when we talk about grammar? For example, where does vocabulary end and grammar start? Does grammar stop at the sentence?

grammar /ɡræmə^r/. *noun* **1** [U] (the study or use of) the rules about how words change their form and combine with words to make sentences. (*Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary*, 2005)

Traditionally, the way 'words change their form' is called *morphology*. In English, this includes the way **verbs** change from the present to the past (*walk → walked*) or **nouns** change from singular to plural (*dog → dogs*). The way that words 'combine with words to make sentences' is called *syntax*. Thus, the order of words that can go before a noun (*both the two small black dogs*) is governed by rules of **syntax**, just as the way that this **phrase** forms part of a sentence: *Both the two small black dogs ran away*. Compare this with the ungrammatical: **The both two black small dogs away ran*.

So grammar deals with the morphology and syntax of sentences. But there are some problems. Morphology also describes the way that words change and combine to make other words: *bull + dog = bulldog; run + -er = runner; run + out + of = run out of*. Not to mention idioms like *go to the dogs, a dog's breakfast*. So there's a fuzzy line between vocabulary (i.e. what you might find in a dictionary) and grammar.

Also, grammar extends beyond sentences. Consider: *The dogs ran away*. *I chased them*. Here *them* refers back to *the dogs* in the previous sentence – suggesting that there's also some fuzziness between grammar and what is called *discourse* (see **9**).

Finally, a distinction needs to be made between grammar and usage: a sentence might be technically ungrammatical but commonly used, like *Long time no see*; or it may be grammatically feasible but highly unlikely, e.g. *?The dogs had been being walked*.

Does English have a lot of grammar? 2

It's a common perception that the success of English as a global language owes a lot to the fact that it has very little grammar. Is this true?

Anyone who has studied Spanish or Turkish will be aware that in these languages there are many different forms of the **verb**. Likewise, German and Russian have many different forms of the **noun**. English is much simpler in these respects. Regular verbs have four forms in all: *walk, walked, walks,* and *walking*. Most nouns have just two: *dog* and *dogs*. (Three if we count *dog's*.) This is because English is not a highly inflected language: it does not have a lot of grammatical endings.

But this doesn't mean that English is grammar-light. If that were the case, then English-speakers would be somewhat limited in terms of the meanings they could express. And English learners would only rarely make mistakes!

Despite being minimally inflected, verbs in English employ a variety of **auxiliaries** to express different shades of meaning: *I have walked, I had been walking,* etc., which, in combination with changes in word order, distinguish between statements and questions: *Did you walk? Has the dog been walked?* Likewise, English uses a wide variety of **determiners** to identify the reference of nouns: *a dog, those dogs, no dog, a great many of their dogs,* etc. As with **auxiliary verbs,** there are tight restrictions on the order of these function words. In fact, what English lacks in **inflections**, it makes up in terms of **syntax**. In the absence of case markings, the difference between *The dog bit the man* and *The man bit the dog* depends entirely on word order.

Nevertheless, for the purposes of communicating in English as an international language, it's arguable that learners only need a relatively small subset of the grammatical potential of English. This is the argument that inspired the development of Basic English in the 1930s, and, more recently, Globish, both of which claim to have streamlined the grammar of English.

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3   What is prescriptive grammar?

> A doctor's prescription tells you what medicine you should take. In similar fashion, a prescriptive grammar tells you what you should say or write.

Most people associate *grammar* with the kinds of rules they were taught at school in classes called either English, or Language Arts. These are typically rules of 'correct usage' or 'good style'. They are invariably associated with educated or even prestigious varieties of the language, as opposed to colloquial language or, worse, slang. For example:

- Do not say: *You are taller than me*. Say: *You are taller than I*. *Than* is a **conjunction** and *I* is the **subject** of the (reduced) **clause**: *I am*.
- *None of us want to go* is incorrect. *None* is a singular **pronoun**, so *None of us wants to go*.
- Do not say: *I didn't say nothing*. Say: *I didn't say anything*. You can't use a double negative because two negatives make a positive.

Notice that these 'rules-as-regulations' make certain questionable claims. Why, for example, is *than* a **conjunction** and not a **preposition**? Who says that *none* is singular? Or they appeal to logic, as if language was modelled on mathematics. Notice, too, that the application of such rules often produces sentences that sound contrived and unusual.

A descriptive grammar, on the other hand, aims to describe language as it is actually used. To this end, descriptive grammarians draw on corpora (the plural of *corpus*), i.e. digitally-stored databases of attested language use. However, even descriptive grammarians have to make decisions as to what language is standard versus non-standard. While most teaching grammars would prefer *You are taller than me*, few would accept *I didn't say nothing*.

Also, learners are aware that language projects certain values: knowing 'good style' is part of learning the target language culture. So, there may be a place for judicious doses of the prescriptive medicine.

Are British and American grammars really different? 4

> **'You say *tomayto* and I say *tomahto*.'** The two major varieties of English differ, of course, in their pronunciation. And in many of their word choices. But their grammar?

First of all, it needs to be emphasized that there are not two monolithic varieties of English, one on each side of the Atlantic Ocean. What is loosely classed as British English (BrE) includes a wide range of regional and social varieties, each distinguished by their own phonological, lexical and grammatical features. Similar variety characterizes American English (AmE). Speakers of both subscribe to the idea of there being a standard (even if they themselves don't speak it), i.e. a widely distributed variety associated with education and broadcasting, and which serves as the model for teaching to English language learners.

So, how are these two standard varieties different, grammatically speaking? The main differences that might have implications for the teaching of English are the following:

- the AmE preference for the past simple over the present perfect with *just, already,* and *yet*, as in *Did you have brunch yet?* (AmE);
- the form of some past tense **verbs**, where AmE uses *-ed* for the past of *learn, spell, burn, dream,* etc. (cf. BrE *learnt, spelt, burnt, dreamt*), and where AmE has retained some irregular past **tense** forms such as *dove* (BrE *dived*) and *pled* (*pleaded*);
- *get* has two past **participles** in AmE, *got* and *gotten*, each with a different meaning: *I've got that book at home* [= I have it] v *I've just gotten a new book* [= I have acquired it];
- AmE prefers to use collective **nouns** (*the government, the team*) in the singular, whereas BrE allows *the government are…*;
- the disappearance, in AmE, of the forms *shall/shan't* and their replacement with *will/won't*.

Prescriptive grammarians (see **2**) are also more insistent, in the US, on using the so-called subjunctive in certain constructions (see **69**), and on not using *which* in restrictive clauses: *The rule which I just broke is ridiculous!*

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5 Is there a difference between spoken and written grammar?

It used to be thought that the grammar of spoken language mirrored the grammar of written language. But does it?

Speaking, unlike most writing, happens spontaneously. This means planning and production are happening at the same time, and this constrains the degree of grammatical complexity that is feasible. Moreover, most speaking is interactive, and this is reflected in its construction. Here, for example, is an extract of naturally-occurring talk from the Cambridge English Corpus:

1 I was talking to somebody who was a vegetarian and they know I'm on this diet and that I've lost this weight and stuff and they said for them to go back to grease was what did them in.
2 Uh-huh. Well and our son can't eat grease period.
3 Oh.
4 He and grease just ...
5 Really?
6 He can't eat grease. Yeah.
7 We don't fry meat. I do ... I like my egg fried in butter and that's what we had tonight. I had eggs and ham and anyway I fried it in butter and I like that really well and uh that doesn't seem to bother me so I don't know what ...

Features of the spontaneity include a tendency to produce short sequences linked by the **conjunctions** *and, so, but* (Turns 1 and 7); to attach 'tails' to utterances (*period, Yeah*); the use of formulaic language (*so I don't know what*) and vague language (*and stuff*); incomplete utterances and false starts (Turns 4 and 7), and filled pauses (*uh*).

Arguably, these features are not common in written language; nor are some characteristics of written language much used in spoken language, which raises the question as to whether teaching only written grammar is the best preparation for speaking.

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Is grammar learned in a set order?   6

> **The assumption underlying most teaching syllabuses is that the order in which grammar items are taught is the order in which they are learned. But is this really true?**

Traditionally, and to this day, the items in a grammar syllabus are typically sequenced in terms of *utility* and *difficulty*. The utility of an item is a measure of its likely usefulness for the learner: highly frequent structures like the present simple are clearly more useful than relatively rare structures like the third conditional.

An item's difficulty is calculated on the basis of its structural complexity – simple structures like the present simple are taught before more complex ones, like the present perfect continuous. Difficulty can also be conceptual: a concept like countability (as in *one dog, two dogs*) is considered easier than a concept like definiteness (*a dog* v *the dog*). Finally, an item might be more or less difficult according to whether it has a counterpart in the learner's first language (L1). A learner whose L1 doesn't have **auxiliary verbs** will find these difficult.

Underlying these principles is the assumption that the order in which items are taught will be reflected in the order in which they are learned.

However, research has since shown that learners seem to follow their own 'built-in syllabus' independently of their L1, and irrespective of the teaching order. So, all learners seem to master plural forms before the possessive *'s* (*the dog's breakfast*), and irregular **verbs** (*went, saw*) before regular ones (*worked, looked*). These findings challenge the view that teaching can directly influence learning.

More recently still, research has shown that the built-in syllabus varies according to the learner's L1. So learners who have no **articles** in their L1 (as in Russian) will acquire articles (*a, the*) later and in a different order than learners whose L1 has this feature.

So yes, there is a set order for grammar acquisition, but it is strongly influenced by the learner's L1.

7 How is grammar best taught?

> The role of grammar in the curriculum is hotly debated.
> How it should be taught is equally contentious.

A grammar describes the rules of the language. It follows (so it was thought) that the best way to teach it is to explain these rules and then practise them. Such practice might typically involve translating sentences in and out of the target language. This is the kind of scholastic approach that dominated the teaching of classical languages, like Latin and Greek, and, to a certain extent persists in the teaching of modern languages. Many self-study courses and digital apps subscribe closely to this system.

A radically different approach attempts to simulate the natural way we learn our first language, by immersion in the processes of using language and thereby getting a feel for it. This more experiential approach rejects the explicit teaching of rules and the use of translation.

The characteristics of these two extremes can be summed up like this:

the scholastic approach	the natural approach
academic	experiential
explicit instruction	implicit learning
bilingual	monolingual
rule learning (deductive)	rule discovery (inductive)
focus on written language	focus on spoken language
focus on accuracy	focus on fluency

The history of language teaching has swung between these two extremes. Nowadays, there is a greater tolerance for features of both. So, for example, experiences of language in use might be combined with explicit instruction; giving rules might be combined with discovering them. The exact blend will depend on such factors as the learners' characteristics and the grammar item itself – some more complex items are more easily taught, while others are better simply picked up.

What is the point of rules? 8

> **Rules are a useful aid to learning – but only if they are reliable. So many grammar rules seem unreliable because they have exceptions.**

Grammar rules are not like road rules: they are not *regulations,* but more like *regularities*. That is, they describe the patterns and combinations that occur in real language use. Some rules are purely about form: *Use the indefinite **article** an before words that begin with a vowel sound*: an ice cream. Other rules relate specific forms to specific meanings: *We use the present simple with **verbs** like* have, love, want, *to talk about states*: I love ice cream.

But language is a living thing: these patterns change. For example, a pattern for asking questions that was common in Shakespeare's day is to invert the **verb** and the **subject**:

Parolles: Why think you so? (*All's Well That Ends Well*)

At the same time, a new pattern using **auxiliary verbs** was emerging:

Rosalind: Do you think so? (*As you Like it*)

Eventually, the new pattern prevailed. Exceptions to rules are often evidence that a change is taking place. Or that the rule has not yet been generalized to all cases, as in the case of irregular verbs.

Sometimes, the exceptions are not really exceptions at all, but evidence of a more general rule. For example, the rule about **state verbs** (above) cannot easily accommodate an example like *I'm loving it!* unless we change the rule so that it is more elastic. (See **55** for an explanation.)

The fact that rules are not 100% reliable does not mean they are useless, so long as we recognize that they are less regulations than 'rules of thumb'.

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9 Is there grammar 'beyond the sentence'?

Grammar is concerned with the way that words combine to form sentences. But is grammar only about sentences?

Until recently, grammar was concerned exclusively with sentences, especially of the written and invented variety. With the advent of **discourse** analysis, however, the angle widened to embrace whole texts and the way they achieve internal **cohesion**. Their sentences are connected and sequenced in ways that are regular and predictable.

Take, for example, this short text in a London tube station:

> *Going to Covent Garden?*
>
> Covent Gdn Station gets very busy at weekends and in the evenings. But you can avoid the crowds by walking there from Holborn or Leicester Square. The short walk is clearly signposted above ground and maps are on display at both stations.

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The text, like many public notices, has a problem-solution structure. The negative implication of the phrase *very busy* is contrasted (using the linker *But*) with the positive *can avoid the crowds*. The fact that the walk is *short* and *clearly signposted* also has positive connotations. This, and the way the reader is directly addressed as *you*, helps us infer the writer's intention, i.e. advice. The writer seems to be saying, 'this is *our* solution to *your* problem.' Note also that the last sentence is not easily understood on its own, since it uses specific **determiners** to reference the sentence before it: *the short walk; both stations*.

In short, the text displays structural and grammatical features that extend beyond the individual sentences, supporting the argument that grammar should be taught and practised in its contexts of use.