



A
**DESCRIPTIVE
GRAMMAR**
of
ENGLISH

**Modern English Grammar
by example**

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Andrew Rossiter

A
DESCRIPTIVE
GRAMMAR
of
ENGLISH

BY EXAMPLE

PDF **SAMPLER** VERSION

Andrew Rossiter

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“Overall, this is a useful reference book to have on hand when planning for and teaching grammar lessons. The clarity of explanations and wealth of examples, alongside helpful visual keys, provide both new and experienced teachers with something easy to dip into, regardless of the language level they are teaching.”

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English Australia journal

Table of Contents (of the full edition)

1. Verbs

1.1. Verbs: What are verbs?	1.1.1. Verbs in the sentence	
	1.1.2. Different types of verb	1.1.3. Tense, aspect, voice
	1.1.4. Modality	1.1.5. Moods
	1.1.6. The subjunctive5
1.2. Verbs: Present tenses	1.2.1. Different types of present tense	
	1.2.2. The simple present	1.2.3. The present progressive.....9
1.3. Verbs: Expressing the future	1.3.1. Forms of the future	
	1.3.2. The present tense used as a future tense	
	1.3.3. <i>Will</i> and <i>going to</i>	1.3.4. <i>Shall</i>
	1.3.5. Negative forms	1.3.6. Other forms of the future.....12
1.4. Verbs: Expressing the past	1.4.1. Forms of past tenses	
	1.4.2. The Simple past	1.4.3. The present perfect
	1.4.4. The past perfect	1.4.6. The future perfect.....15
1.5. Verbs: Conditional structures with <i>if</i> or <i>unless</i>		
	1.5.1. Conditional clauses	1.5.2. Open <i>if</i> clauses
	1.5.3. The open hypothesis	1.5.4. The unfulfilled hypothesis
	1.5.5. Omission of <i>if</i>	1.5.6. <i>Whether</i>18
1.6. Verbs: The infinitive	1.6.1. Short infinitives	1.6.2. Full infinitives with <i>to</i>
	1.6.3. Past infinitives	1.6.4. Passive infinitives
	1.6.5. Infinitive or gerund?	1.6.6. Other points
	1.6.7. Split infinitives22
1.7. Verbs: The imperative	1.7.1. Uses of the imperative	1.7.2. Forms of the imperative, soft imperatives
	1.7.3. Emphatic imperatives28
1.8. Verbs: Active and passive	1.8.1 Usage	1.8.2. The passive for emphasis
	1.8.3. The passive for impersonal statements	1.8.4. The passive to simplify sentence structure
	1.8.5. Forms of the passive	1.8.6. The passive followed by an object.....30
1.9. Verbs: Gerunds and -ing forms	1.9.1. Different types of word ending in <i>-ing</i>	1.9.2. Gerunds
	1.9.3. Verbal nouns	1.9.4. Areas of confusion
	1.9.5. Present participles	1.9.6. <i>-ing</i> forms in passive structures
	34
1.10. Consecutive verbs - <i>-ing</i> or an infinitive		
	1.10.1. Gerund or infinitive?39
1.11. To be : Forms of <i>to be</i>	1.11.1. Functions – main verb	
	1.11.2. Functions – auxiliary verb	1.11.3. Passive forms with <i>be</i>
	1.11.4. Progressive tenses in the passive	1.11.5. <i>Get</i> used in

place of <i>be</i>	1.11.6. Avoid confusion	1.11.7. <i>To be</i> as a modal verb	41
1.12. To have:	1.12.1. <i>Have</i> as a main verb, - forms, abbreviated forms, negative forms	1.12.2. <i>Have</i> or <i>have got</i> ?	1.12.3. <i>Have</i> as an auxiliary verb – forms, contracted forms and negative forms
			46
1.13. Do and make:	uses and differences	1.13.1. Meanings	1.13.2
	<i>Do</i> – uses and expressions	1.13.3 <i>Make</i> - functions and usage	52
1.14. Get and got:	1.14.1. Forms of <i>get</i>	1.14.1. <i>Get</i> as a main verb	
	1.14.2. Phrasal and prepositional uses	1.14.3. <i>Get</i> as passive auxiliary	56
1.15. Modal verbs of obligation	- <i>must, should, ought to, need to</i>		
	1.15.1. Firm obligation, <i>must & have to</i>		
	1.15.2. Recommendation or moral obligation <i>should & ought to</i> , and <i>need (to)</i>		58
1.16 Modal verbs of ability	- <i>can, could, may</i> and <i>might</i> .		
	1.16.1. Open possibility <i>can could & be able to</i>		
	1.16.2. Potential possibility, authority – <i>may & might</i> ..		62
1.17. Verbs of enabling & obligation	- <i>allow, let, prevent</i> etc		
	1.17.1. Obligation and authority	1.17.2. Prevention	
	1.17.3. Causative verbs <i>let make have</i>		66
1.18. Phrasal & prepositional verbs	How to distinguish between them		
	1.18.1. Separable or inseparable?	1.18.2. Transitive verbs	
	1.18.3. Intransitive verbs	1.18.4. Special cases & exceptions	68
1.19. Irregular verbs	General principles		73

2. The Noun phrase

2.1. Nouns :	What is a noun?	2.1.1. Classification of nouns	
	2.1.2. Nouns and gender	2.1.3. The formation of nouns	
	2.1.4. Nouns in the plural	2.1.5. Collective nouns	74
2.2. Noun phrases	Types of noun phrase	2.2.1 Composition	
	2.2.2. Modifiers in noun phrases	2.2.3. Exceptions	81
2.3. Count and non-count nouns			
	2.3.1. Count nouns	2.3.2. Non-count nouns	2.3.3. Usage
	2.3.4. Nouns that can be countable or uncountable		
	2.3.5. Quantifiers with count & non-count nouns		83
2.4. Pronouns 1:	Definition	2.4.1. Personal pronouns , including <i>one</i> , reflexive pronouns, emphatic pronouns, indefinite pronouns, gender-neutral pronouns, and <i>there</i> as a pronoun	87
2.4.2. Pronouns 2:	Relative pronouns and adjectives	functions and forms, Nominal relative pronouns, Relative adjectives, <i>why, when</i>	

& <i>how</i> 2.4.3. Relative adverb - <i>however</i>	91
2.4.4 Pronouns 3: Demonstrative pronouns <i>this that these those</i>	95
2.5. Articles 2.5.1. Usage	
2.5.2. The definite article <i>the</i> 2.5.3. Indefinite articles <i>a an</i>	
2.5.4. Is an article necessary? 2.5.5. Articles & quantifiers.....	98
2.6. Quantifiers Definition – 2.6.1. <i>some, any, no</i> & their compounds 2.6.2. Large quantity quantifiers <i>Much, many lots of</i> etc.	
2.6.3. Small quantity quantifiers – <i>few, a few, little</i> etc.	
2.6.4. Neutral and relative quantity quantifiers - <i>some, each, all,</i> <i>whole most</i> etc. 2.6.5. Quantifiers followed by <i>of</i>	100
2.7. Numbers and counting 2.7.1. Cardinal numbers	113
2.7.2. Ordinals	117
2.7.3. Fractions and decimals	119
2.8. Possession Using <i>of</i> or <i>'s</i>	
2.8.1. Animate, human possessors	
2.8.2. Inanimate possessors	121
2.9. Adjectives in English, Definition 2.9.1. Determining adjectives	
2.9.2. Descriptive adjectives, qualifying or classifying	
2.9.3. Usage – attributive or predicative 2.9.4. Plural adjectives	
2.9.5. The formation of adjectives 2.9.6. Comparison of adjectives 2.9.7. The gradation of adjectives 2.9.8. Adjective order.....	125

3. *Other parts of speech*

3.1. Adverbs in English 3.1.1. Two families of adverb	
3.1.2. Adverbs related to adjectives	
3.1.3. Adverbs unrelated to adjectives	
3.1.4. Sentence adverbs.....	132
3.2. Prepositions Definition	
3.2.1. Prepositions of position & direction 3.2.2. Prepositions of time	
3.2.3. Manner & other relations 3.2.4 Other prepositions	
3.2.5. End a sentence with a preposition.....	137
3.3. Conjunctions and connectors. Definition	
3.3.1. Coordinating conjunctions <i>but and nor yet or</i>	
3.3.1.2. Starting a sentence with a conjunction	
3.3.2. Subordinating conjunctions 3.3.3. Examples	
3.3.4. <i>So</i> as a coordinating conjunction	
3.3.5. Correlating coordinators (<i>both... and, either... or</i> etc).....	143
3.4. Conjunctive adverbs such as <i>however</i> or <i>therefore</i>	

3.4.1. Definition – the nature of conjunctive adverbs	
3.4.2. Usage	149

4. Sentences and clauses

4.1. Word order in statements	
4.1.1. Subject verb and direct object	
4.1.2. Other elements including indirect objects and adverb phrases	
4.1.3. Complex or compound sentences	153
4.2. Word order in questions Essential question structure	
4.2.1. Question words or <i>wh</i> -words	
4.2.2. Questions with single word verbs	
4.2.3. Exceptions.....	157
4.3. Reported questions Reported questions and verb tenses	
4.3.1. Reporting the present – simultaneous reporting	
4.3.2. Reporting the past – deferred reporting	
4.3.3. Absolute and relative adverbs of time and place	159
4.4. Tag questions	
4.4.1. Definitions and functions	
4.4.2. Structure of tag questions	
4.4.3. Formation and use of tags.	
4.4.4. Alternative forms of negative tags.....	163
4.5. Negative structures Different ways of expressing negation in English	
4.5.1. Negative forms of the verb	
4.5.2. Negating with a quantifier	
4.5.3. Negation using a noun or pronoun	
4.5.4. Negation using an adverb or adverb phrase	
4.5.5. <i>neither... nor</i> – linking negative elements	
4.5.6. Negation using negative adjectives	
4.5.7. Negation and tag questions.....	167
4.6. Relative clauses Forms and functions	
4.6.1. The relative pronoun as subject	
4.6.2. The relative pronoun as object	
4.6.3. <i>Whose</i>	
4.6.4. Relative clauses starting with a preposition	
4.6.5. More complex structures	
4.6.6. Defining and non-defining relative clauses	
4.6.7. Using <i>that</i> instead of <i>who</i> or <i>which</i>	
4.6.8. Relative clauses qualifying a whole sentence	
4.6.9. Omission of the relative pronoun	172
4.7. Punctuation	178
4.8. Language and style	184
5. Glossary of essential grammar terms.....	188

Note: Use of **colour** in this book.

This grammar makes extensive use of **colour coding**. Generally speaking **dark rust red** colour is used to highlight the **key words** in any paragraph. When other colours are used, such as **scarlet** or **blue** or **green**, these are

essentially to contrast different structures or different categories, or to relate contrastive examples to different cases.

1. Verbs in English

1.1. What are verbs and how are they used?

Verbs are among the essential building blocks of communication in any language. They are one of the two essential elements of a sentence or clause. The other is the subject.

Verbs: a definition

A **verb** exists in relation to a **subject**. It is the key and essential element of the **predicate** in a sentence. The verb expresses an action or process undertaken by or undergone by the subject, or a situation defining the subject.

Actions: to break, to start, to shout

Processes: to sleep, to eat, to think

Situations: to be, to seem, to live

1.1.1. Verbs in the sentence

Every sentence is made up of a **subject** and a **predicate**. The predicate must contain a **verb**, and can contain many other elements too (a complement, an object or more, adverbs, circumstantial expressions, etc.).

Examples

- **The president sneezed.**
- **You have taken the wrong bag.**
- **The man and the woman both forgot.**
- **He forgot to get off the train at York.**

1.1.2. Different types of verb

Transitive or intransitive?

Verbs can either be **transitive** or **intransitive**.

- A transitive verb **requires** an object.
- An intransitive verb **cannot have** an object.

Some verbs can be transitive or intransitive, depending on context.

Examples

Transitive: to send, to employ, to like, to tell

Intransitive: to sleep, to die, to happen

Verbs that can be either: to give, to burn, to smell

Stative or dynamic?

Verbs can be either **stative** or **dynamic**. Stative verbs describe a situation or state, dynamic verbs describe a process or change of state. The two categories are incompatible with each other.

Stative - describing a state: *to know, to lie, to be, to like,*

Dynamic - expressing a change of state: *to discover, to lie down, to become, to learn.*

Examples

- 1) I **know** a lot of people in London.
- 2) My father **likes** beer but not whisky.
- 3) That box **weighs** over twenty kilos.
- 4) Who **does** this phone **belong** to?
- 5) The scientists **discovered** a new planet on the edge of the solar system.
- 6) I **sat down** and **went** to sleep.
- 7) The price **has increased** by ten euros.
- 8) **Have** you **bought** a new bike?

1.1.3. Tense, aspect, voice

The content of this section is not included in this free sampler edition. For this content, see the full edition of [A Descriptive Grammar of English](#), available from Amazon and good bookstores.

1.1.4. Other verb forms in English: modality

Other forms or tenses, and notably conditionals, are formed with the help of modal verbs: **can, could, may, might, would**, plus **must, should** and **ought to**. These forms are structured in the same way as the future or future perfect. **These are the only structures possible using modal auxiliaries.**

Here is a table of modal verb forms, using the modal auxiliary *must*.

Modality <i>Aspect</i>	Modality in the present or future	Modality in the past
<i>Simple, active</i>	I must take	I must have taken
<i>Progressive, active</i>	I must be taking	I must have been taking
<i>Simple, passive</i>	I must be taken	I must have been taken
<i>Progressive, passive</i>	<i>rare</i>	<i>rare</i>

1.1.5. Moods

Verbs can be used in three different **moods**

- **The indicative** (§ 1.2 to § 1.5)
- **The subjunctive** (§ 1.1.6)
- **The imperative** (§ 1.7)

Most of the time, verbs are used in the **indicative** mood, which is the normal mood, as illustrated in all the examples above.

As a distinctive verb form, the **subjunctive** is very rare in English, and is normally found only in a few expressions, the most common of which is ***If I were you***. See next section - § 1.1.6 below.

The **imperative** is used to give orders, instructions, invitations.

1.1.6. The subjunctive in English

Most English-speakers do not know that there is a subjunctive mood in English; but there is, and many use it quite regularly, without realising. However there is only one context in which the subjunctive is commonly used, and that is in the context of hypothetical conditional statements. And of these, there is just one recognisably subjunctive expression that is used - from time to time - by most people, and it is: ***If I were you*** as in:

If I were you, I'd drive more carefully.

Note that the expression is "*If I were you*" (a subjunctive), and not "*If I was you*" (an indicative), though the second form is also heard.

With all verbs except *to be*, the **present subjunctive** is **identical** in form to the preterite, to the point that the existence of the present subjunctive as a tense in its own right is largely irrelevant in terms of modern grammar.

1.2. The present tenses in English

1.2.1. Different types of present tense in English

English uses **two** forms of the present, the **Present simple** and the **Present progressive**. This section looks at verbs in the active voice.

► For forms of the present tenses in the passive voice, see §1.8. The Passive.

1.2.2. The present simple

In short, the **Present Simple** is used to express:

- a) **permanent** states and permanent truths
- b) **repetitive** actions
- c) **instant** actions (present or future).

Examples – Present simple

- a1) I **like** apples, but I **don't like** oranges.
- a2) I **live** in London, and I **work** for a big bank.
- a3) Flowers **grow** well in a warm sunny climate.
- a4) Tomorrow never **comes**.
- b1) My brother often.....

A full set of examples is provided in the ebook, paperback or hardback version of [A Descriptive Grammar of English](#) .

1.2.2.1. The present simple affirmative

It is formed using the root form of the verb: there is only one ending to add, an **S** on the third person singular, or **ES** onto verbs ending in **-s**, **-sh**, **-x**, and **-o**.

Sample verbs	1st sing.	2nd sing.	3rd sing.	1st plural	2nd plural	3rd plural
Bring	I bring	you bring	he, she, it brings	we bring	you bring	they bring
Do	I do	you do	he, she, it does	we do	you do	they do
Pass	I pass	you pass	he, she, it passes	we pass	you pass	they pass

1.2.2.2. The present simple negative

For all verbs, the present simple negative is formed using the root of the verb, and the auxiliary **do** in the negative form: **do not** and **does not** are normally contracted in spoken English, and may also be contracted in the written language.

Sample verbs	1st sing.	2nd sing.	3rd sing.	1st plural	2nd plural	3rd plural
Bring	I do not / don't bring	you do not / don't bring	he, she, it does not / doesn't bring	we do not / don't bring	you do not / don't bring	they do not / don't bring
Speak	I don't speak	you don't speak	he, she, it doesn't speak	we don't speak	you don't speak	they don't speak

1.2.3. The present progressive

In short, the **Present Progressive** is used to express:

- developing situations.
- actions that are actually taking place.
- future** actions.

1.2.3.1. The present progressive affirmative

This is formed using the **present participle** of the verb and the present tense of **to be**. The present participle is formed by adding **-ing** to the root (or to the root minus its final **-e** for verbs ending in **e**). The auxiliary is usually contracted in spoken English (as in the second line of the sample verbs table below).

Examples – Present progressive

- a1) John **is getting** better.
- a2) The weather **isn't improving**.
- b1) This week I **am working** in New York.
- b2) Look! That man's **stealing** my car!
- b3) Slow down, you're **going** too fast!
- c1) He's **not going** on holiday **tomorrow**.
- c2) He said he's **retiring next year**.

Sample verbs	1st sing.	2nd sing.	3rd sing.	1st plural	2nd plural	3rd plural
Stand	I am standing	you are standing	he, she, it is standing	we are standing	you are standing	they are standing
Take	I'm taking	you're taking	he, she, it's taking	we're taking	you're taking	they're taking

1.2.3.2. The present progressive negative

The content of this section is not included in this PDF sampler.

► See § 4.5. for more on **negation** in general.

Some verbs are never used in the progressive form

Take care ! Some verbs are almost never used in the present progressive - notably certain verbs of permanent state, such as **know, be, like, exist**.

We can say: *I know the train is arriving late.*

We **cannot** say: *I am knowing the train is arriving late.*

1.2.4. Present simple vs. present progressive:

A contrastive example:

This sentence is a clear example of the difference in usage between the two forms:

Yes I **eat** hamburgers, but **I'm not eating** a hamburger right now !

1.3. *Expressing the future in English*

1.3.1. Forms of the future in English

Sections 1.3 to 1.4.3 are not included in this free sampler edition. For this content, see the full edition of [A Descriptive Grammar of English](#), available from Amazon and good bookstores.

1.4.4. The past perfect or pluperfect.

The **past perfect or pluperfect**, as in **He had seen**, is normally only used in English when one past event (either a specific action, or a continuous condition) has to be situated *in a more distant past* than another past event. In some situations, the progressive or continuous form is necessary.

Examples

I **had just put** the phone down, when the doorbell rang.
The man **had been drinking** before the accident happened.
He **had worked** in the company for five years before he got promotion.

There are some other uses too, but they are less common. Note, for example, the use of the past perfect (and inversion) after **hardly**:

*Hardly **had I put** the phone down, than the phone rang.*

1.4.5. The future perfect

The future perfect, as in **He will have seen**,

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1.5. The Conditional in English

Conditional clauses in English, after **if** or **unless**

1.5.1. Definition of a conditional clause

A conditional clause is a type of subordinate clause, most commonly introduced by the conjunction **if** or **unless**, or occasionally **whether**. Like most subordinate clauses introduced by a conjunction, the conditional clause can either go **before** the main clause, or **after** it.

There are three types of conditional statement in English:

1. **Type 1: Open** conditional *as in* If you want, you can go home.
2. **Type 2: Hypothetical** conditional *as in* If you wanted, you could go home.
3. **Type 3: Unfulfilled** hypothetical *as in* If you had wanted, you could have gone home.
4. (Hypothetical conditional clauses can also be formed **without if**).

1.5.2. Open **if** clause - the **open conditional** statement

Open conditional (Type 1) **if** clauses are most commonly used to speak of one event or situation which is conditional on another .

Type 1a. One future event is dependent on another. The verb of the **main** clause is in the **future tense** with "will" (or sometimes another modal). The verb of the **conditional** clause is in the **simple present** tense.

Type 1b. One potentially constant state of reality or circumstance is dependent on another. In this case **both verbs** are in the **present** tense.

Type 1c. If the time-frame in the past, both verbs are normally in the simple **preterite**, though sometimes the verb in the conditional clause may be in the **past progressive**.

1a If you **have** a coffee at night, you **won't sleep** well.

1a If you **finish** in the first ten, you'll **get** a medal.

1b If I **sleep** well at night, I **feel** much happier next morning.

1b If the temperature **falls**

A full set of examples is provided in the ebook, paperback or hardback version of [A Descriptive Grammar of English](#)

In an open conditional statement, **if** is sometimes replaced by **when**: but there is a difference. Using "**if**" implies that the condition really is open and may not be fulfilled, using "**when**" implies that the condition will / would be fulfilled, that the event will / would really take place.

1.5.3. Open hypothetical conditional statement

We use an open hypothetical conditional (Type 2) **if clause** to refer to a possible future situation which depends on another possible future situation.

The verb of the **main clause** uses the **present conditional** tense (*would* + infinitive, or *could* + infinitive);

The verb of the **conditional clause** normally uses the **present subjunctive** or **preterite** (these two tenses are identical except with *to be*). Occasionally, the conditional aspect of the statement can be emphasised by using the form *were* + *to* + infinitive.

- 1A If you **ate** too much, **you'd (you would) get** fatter.
1B You'd **get** fatter if you **ate** too much.
2A If everyone **worked** faster, we **would / could finish** in time.
2B We **wouldn't finish** in time unless everyone **worked** faster.
2C If everyone **were to work** faster, we **would/could finish** in time.
3 If I **went** to London, I **would / could visit** the British Museum.
4. If you **visited** Scotland, you **could see** Edinburgh Castle.
5 Unless the directors **increased** sales, **we'd have to** close this shop.

Note also this common expression (which uses the open hypothetical form, though it is clearly quite impossible!)

6. *If I were you, I'd* as in.
If I **were** you, I'd go a bit slower
If I **were** you, I'd put that gun down!!

Open hypothetical structures are also used in cases of **reported or indirect speech**, when reporting an original statement using a type 1 conditional sentence

My professor told me **I'd do** much better *if I worked harder*.

(Original statement: "You'll do much better if you **work** harder.")

The magistrate informed him that **he'd go** to prison *unless he stopped stealing*.

(Original statement: "You'll go to prison unless you **stop** stealing")

The newspaper reported that *unless the directors could increase sales, they'd have to close* the shop.

1.5.4. The unfulfilled hypothesis

This refers to a situation in which an event **might have** taken place, but did **not**, because a condition was not fulfilled.

The verb of the **main** clause goes in the **past conditional** (*would / could etc. + have + past participle*).

The verb of the **conditional** clause is in the **past perfect** (*had + past participle*).

If you **had eaten** too much, you'd (you **would**) **have got** fatter.

You'd **have got** fatter if you'd **eaten** too much.

If everyone **had worked** fast, we'd **have finished** in time (*but we didn't*).

We **wouldn't / couldn't / mightn't** etc. **have finished** in time unless everyone **had worked** fast (*but we did*).

If I **had gone** to London, I **could have visited** the British Museum (*but I didn't*).

If you **had visited** Scotland, you **could have visited** Edinburgh Castle (*but you didn't*).

Unless we'd **been** very confident of success, we **wouldn't have even tried**. (*But we were confident, we did try, and we succeeded*).

Note: using " unless"

.....

The rest of this section, and sections 1.5.5 to 1.6.6, are not included in this free sampler version. To discover this content, consult one of the full editions of *A Descriptive Grammar of English* available from [Amazon](#) and good bookstores.

1.6.7. Split infinitives

There is a persistent rumour that it is not acceptable to split infinitives in English. This is absolutely wrong. Infinitives can be split, and have always been able to be split in good English. Indeed, there are cases in which it is virtually **essential** to split infinitives, unless you want to resort to a long and cumbersome paraphrase.

The most famous split infinitive of modern times is the classic introduction to the **Star Trek** TV series, which went:

These are the voyages of the Starship Enterprise, its 5 year mission to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, **to boldly go** where no man has gone before.

In this case the split infinitive is not essential; the text could have said "*to go boldly*", so in this case there is no compelling reason to use a split infinitive. In other cases, there is. Look at this example.

The doctors decided **to rapidly stop** administering pain-killers.

It is not possible to put the word **rapidly** anywhere else in the sentence without either making it **ambiguous**, or else **changing the meaning**. Compare these examples.

The doctors decided **to rapidly stop** administering pain-killers.
Rapidly the doctors decided to stop administering pain-killers.
The doctors decided **rapidly** to stop administering pain-killers.
The doctors decided to stop **rapidly** administering pain-killers.
The doctors decided to stop administering pain-killers **rapidly**.

The only way in this example to avoid the split infinitive while not changing the meaning is to write a longer paraphrase:

*The doctors decided **they would rapidly stop** administering the pain killers.*

Great writers and split infinitives

Until the twentieth century, even more so than today, split infinitives were uncommon; but great writers used them from time to time.

"They had indeed some boats in the river, but they ... served **to just waft** them over, or to fish in them." *Daniel Defoe*

"Milton was too busy **to much miss** his wife." *Samuel Johnson*

From the 19th century onwards, writers resorted more and more often to using split infinitives; Abraham Lincoln used them, so did Wordsworth, Henry James and Robert Burns – and many more too.

Why do some people object to split infinitives?

The reasons are historical, and invented. The first attempts to describe English grammar reflected principles of Latin grammar, and in Latin as in Greek, splitting an infinitive really is impossible, since the infinitive is a single word (as in *amare* or *legere*). So to make “good” English like Latin, early grammarians decided that the infinitive was something that should not be split. There is no other reason.

In the nineteenth century, traditional grammars continued to claim that splitting infinitives was bad grammar; but writers were using them more and more. Since the early twentieth century, it has become more or less accepted that split infinitives are not just acceptable, but in some cases unavoidable. And why not? An infinitive is a verb form, and in English most verb forms contain two words which can, and in some cases must, be split.

1.7. The imperative in English

1.7.1. Uses of the imperative

The imperative forms of verbs are used for several specific but similar purposes:

[The rest of this section is not included in this PDF sampler.](#)

1.7.2. Forms of the imperative

[The content of section 1.7.2. is not included in this free PDF sampler](#)

1.7.3. Emphatic imperatives

There are two ways of adding emphasis to an imperative.

The content of section 1.7.3. is not included in this free PDF sampler

1.8. Voices – active and passive

1.8.1. Usage

In European languages, including English, verbs can be used in two different "voices", called the **active** and the **passive**. The active voice is by far the more common of the two. Here are some simple examples of verbs used in the active voice.

Box A: Examples – sentences expressed in the active voice.

1. I **love** football.
2. The people **were talking** very loudly.
3. Winston Churchill **wrote** reports every day.
4. James **hit** the ball very hard.

Most sentences can be expressed without any need to use forms of the passive; however sometimes we may want to change the way a sentence is expressed, in order to imply a slightly different meaning. Generally speaking, it is only **transitive** sentences (sentences that have a direct object) that can be rephrased in the passive.

So let's look at the same four examples again, re-expressed using a passive verb, *when this is possible*.

Box B: the same sentences expressed in the passive.

1. **Football is loved by me.....** *No! this sounds very strange! It would never be said, even if it is technically possible.*
2. This sentence cannot be rephrased in the passive.. **Talk is an intransitive verb.**
3. Reports **were written** every day by Winston Churchill. **OK.**
4. The ball **was hit** very hard by James. **OK.**

The **passive** is used, essentially, in three situations:

- To put more **emphasis** on the word that would be the object of an active sentence.
 - To write an **impersonal** sentence.
 - To simplify the **structure** of a complex sentence.
- Let's see examples of these three situations.

1.8.2. Using the passive for **emphasis**

For the contents of this and the following two sections, see the full version of [*A Descriptive Grammar of English*](#), available from Amazon and good bookstores.

1.8.3. Using the passive to make an **impersonal** sentence

The content of this section is not included in this PDF sampler.

1.8.4. Using the passive to **simplify** sentence structure

The content of this section is not included in this PDF sampler.

1.8.5. Forms of the passive

Most of the active forms of transitive verbs, including the infinitive and the imperative, have equivalent forms in the passive. But **intransitive verbs** cannot be used in the passive.

Here is a table of examples for the verb **to help**.

Form / Tense <i>Aspect, voice</i>	Simple, active	Progressive, active	Simple, passive	Progressive, passive
Present	I help	I am helping	I am helped	I am being helped
Future	I will help	I will be helping	I will be helped	<i>rare</i>
Preterite	I helped	I was helping	I was helped	I was being helped

Present Perfect	I have helped	I have been helping	I have been helped	<i>rare</i>
Past perfect	I had helped	I had been helping	I had been helped	<i>rare</i>
Future perfect	I will have helped	I will have been helping	I will have been helped	<i>rare</i>

For more details see pages on the Present (§ 1.2.), the Past (§ 1.4.), and the Future (§ 1.3.). The passive can also sometimes be formed using the verb **get**, instead of **be**, as an auxiliary. (▶ See § 1.14 Get and got).

1.8.6. The passive followed by an object

Unlike in some other European languages, passive verb forms in English can sometimes be followed by a **direct object**.

For the rest of this section, see the ebook, paperback or hardback versions of *A Descriptive Grammar of English*, available from Amazon and good bookstores.

1.9. Gerunds and *-ing* words

Gerunds, verbal nouns or present participles ending in *-ing*

▶ See also § 1.10: Consecutive verbs.

1.9.1. The different types of word ending in *-ing*:

The English language does not use many grammatical "endings", but some of those it does use have several different functions. The *-ing* ending is one of them. Words ending in *-ing* can be gerunds, verbal nouns, or present participles. **Distinguishing** (= *gerund*) between these, and using them correctly is not always easy – until you understand these three simple rules.

Definitions

The **gerund** is a **verb** which is used as if it were a noun (Examples 1 & 2 below). Since it is a verb, it can **not** be qualified by an adjective, nor preceded by an article, but, like other forms of the verb, it can be modified by an adverb and take a complement.

A **verbal noun** (Examples 3 & 4) is

For the rest of these definitions, see the full version of [*A Descriptive Grammar of English*](#), available from Amazon and good bookstores

See the differences of use that are illustrated by these examples.

Words in *-ing*: Gerund, noun or present participle (or progressive verb form)

1. **Seeing** is **believing**.
2. **Living** cheaply in New York is quite possible.
3. The book was easy **reading**!
4. He managed to make a good **living**.
5. **Smiling**, the lady told them they'd won the big prize.
6. I heard them **arguing** last night.
7. I'm **taking** my brother to the station tonight
8. The man was **phoning** his friend, when the lights went out.

1.9.2. The **gerund** in English: a **verb** used as a noun

The **gerund** in English has the form of the present participle in *-ing*. It is the most common form of the verb used as a noun, and can be the subject (examples 1 to 7 below), or the object of a sentence (8 & 9, 14 to 16) , or follow prepositions (10 to 13).

Examples of **gerunds**

1. **Seeing** is believing.
2. **Reading** that book was very interesting.
3. **Drinking** is essential.
4. **Drinking** too much pop can make you fat.
5. **Taking** the bus was rather a good idea.
6. **Swimming** is very good exercise.
7. **Taking** too many as.....

....*For a full set of examples, see the ebook or print versions of [A Descriptive Grammar of English](#) .*

As the examples above show, the gerund is a verb used **as if it were** a noun, but **not in the same way as** a noun. In other words, **it keeps its verbal qualities**. Since it **is not a noun**, it cannot be qualified by an adjective; on the contrary, it keeps some of the essential features that distinguish a verb, notably that it can take a direct object (examples 2, 4, 7, 11 - 16 above) , and/or be qualified by an adverb (examples 6, 9 & 13).

When gerunds are used as **verbal complements** (second verbs following a first verb), as in examples 8 and 9 above, they can often be rephrased using an infinitive instead of the gerund (For example: *"This article needs to be fully rewritten"*.. using a passive infinitive).

However a few verbs require a gerund, not an infinitive (Examples 14 - 16 above). The most common of these are **admit, consider, dislike, deny, enjoy, finish, involve, miss, mind, suggest,**

► For more details on this, see Annex 1. Consecutive verb structures at the end of this book.

The rest of section 1.9. and section 1.10 are omitted from this free sampler. For this content see the full version of **[A Descriptive Grammar of English](#)**, available from Amazon and good bookstores

1.11. The verb *to be*

Forms

Person		Present	Preterite	Present perfect	Past perfect	Future
1st sing.	I	am	was	have been	had been	will be (shall be)
2nd sing	you	are	were	have been		will be
3rd sing	he, she, etc.	is	was	has been		will be (shall be)
1st plural.	we	are	were	have been		will be
2nd plural	you	are	were	have been		
3rd plural	they	are	were	have been		

1.11.1. Functions: *to be* as a main verb

The verb *to be* is the fundamental verb used to indicate the existence of an entity (person, object, abstraction) or to relate an entity to its qualities or characteristics. In linguistics, it is sometimes known as a *copula*.

Unlike transitive verbs, it does not take a direct object, but a complement, since the subject and complement of the verb *to be* relate to the same entity. The complement of *to be* can be a noun, a noun group, an adjective, or a prepositional phrase.

*Examples of usage of the verb *to be* as main verb*

That man **is** the boss.

That man **is** the winner of last year's Nobel Prize for physics.

That man **is** very intelligent

.....

More examples are included in the full version of [A Descriptive Grammar of English](#) (ebook, paperback or hardback)..

1.11.2. Functions: **to be** as an auxiliary

*Progressive or continuous aspect formed with **to be***

The verb **to be** is used as an auxiliary to denote the **progressive** or **continuous** aspect of an action; it is thus used to form the "present progressive" (§ 1.2.3.) and "past progressive" and other progressive tenses (also called the present continuous and past continuous tenses, etc.). In this case, **be** is followed by the **present participle** of a verb.

We **'re waiting** for the match to begin.
We **have been waiting** for you for two hours.
They **won't be giving** him a prize for his work this time.

Model "stand"	Present progressive	Future progressive	Preterite progressive	Present perfect progressive	Past perfect progressive
1st sing	I am standing	I will be standing	I was standing	I have been standing	I had been standing
2nd sing	you are standing	You will be standing	You were standing	You have been standing	You had been standing
3rd sing	he / she... is standing	He / she ... will be standing	He/ she ... was standing	He / she... have been standing	he / she ... had been standing
1st plural	we are standing	We will be standing	We were standing	We have been standing	We had been standing
2nd plural	you are standing	You will be standing	You were standing	You have been standing	You had been standing
3rd plural	they are standing	They will be standing	They were standing	They have been standing	They had been standing

Other tenses can be formed, including tenses with modal auxiliaries:

examples **I could have been standing** - **They must have been standing.**

1.11.3. Passive forms with **be**

The verb **to be** is also used as an auxiliary to form **passive tenses**. In this case, the auxiliary **be** is followed by the **past participle** of a verb.

Sample verb "Take"	Present simple passive	Future passive	Preterite passive	Present perfect passive	Past perfect passive
1st sing	I am taken	I will be taken	I was taken	I have been taken	I had been taken
3rd sing	It... is taken	He / she ... will be taken	He / she ... was taken	He / she ... has been taken	He / she ... had been taken
Etc					

Other tenses can be formed, including tenses with modal auxiliaries.

Examples

For the examples, see the full version of [A Descriptive Grammar of English](#) (ebook, paperback or hardback)..

1.11.4. Progressive tenses in the passive

The content of this section is not included in this PDF sampler.

1.11.5. **Get** used instead of **be** in passive forms

The content of this section is not included in this PDF sampler.

1.11.7. The verb **to be** as a modal verb

The verb to be is occasionally used as a modal auxiliary; but in this it is a strange verb, as it can have either a value of **futurity**, or a value of **obligation**, or something between the two, **supposition**.

In the first and third persons, it is a modal whose most common value is **futurity**: **in the second person**, its main value is one of **obligation**. However, this distinction is not always true.

Person		Present	Preterite
1st sing.	I	I am to make	was to make
2nd sing	you	You are to make	were to make

3rd sing	he, she, etc.	... is to make	was to make
1st plural.	we	... are to make	were to make
2nd plural	you	... are to make	were to make
3rd plural	they	... are to make	were to make

In other words, while "*I'm to get a new car next week*" would normally mean "*I'm going to get a new car next week*" (futurity), "*You're to go to London next week*" would normally mean "*You should go to London next week*" (mild obligation). However, in many cases, ambiguity is possible, even if **context usually clarifies the meaning**.

1. The train **was to** leave at 8 (meaning: The train *was supposed to* leave at 8).
2. **I'm to** work in London next year (I'm *going to / have to* work in London.....).
3. **I'm to** makee.....

For a full set of examples, see the full version of [A Descriptive Grammar of English](#) (ebook, paperback or hardback).

1.12. The verb *to have*

Forms functions and usage

The verb **have** is one of the two most frequently used verbs in English. It can be used in three different functions in the sentence.

1. As a main verb
2. As an auxiliary verb, and
3. As a modal auxiliary verb.

The rest of this section, and sections up to 1.12.3.3, are not included in this free sampler. Discover them in full in [A Descriptive Grammar of English](#), available from Amazon and good bookstores.

1.12.3.4. Passive forms

Verb forms using the **auxiliary have** can also be put into the passive.

Sample verb " take "	Present perfect passive	Past perfect passive
1st sing	I have been taken	I had been taken
3rd sing	He / she ... has been taken	He / she ... had been taken

Other tenses can be formed, including tenses with modal auxiliaries.

Examples:

You **could have been** seriously injured.
They **must have been** dreaming.

Different examples of use of the verb **have** as an auxiliary

1. I **have** finished my lunch / I've finished my lunch.
2. The president **has** chosen his new team.
3. The president's chosen his new team (*this form is possible in spoken language, but it would not normally be written*).
4. The children **had** gone home five minutes earlier than usual.
5. The captain **had** told his team to play hard in the final minutes of the game.

For more examples, see the full version of [A Descriptive Grammar of English](#) (ebook, paperback or hardback)..

1.12.3.5. The verb **have to** as a modal verb

For information on "have to" as a modal verb, see § ► 1.15.1. Modals of obligation below.

Sections 1.13 to 1.14.2 are not included in this free sampler. Discover them in full in [A Descriptive Grammar of English](#), available from Amazon and good bookstores

(1.14. The verb get)

..... **Three-part verbs:** *Get away with, get down to, get on with, get round to*, the meanings should be clear from the examples.

He looks so innocent he could **get away with** murder .
Come on, it's already 8.30, it's time to **get down to** work.
Get on with the job, and stop looking out of the window.
I've got too much work this week, so I don't think I can **get round to** mending your computer too.

1.14.3. **Get** as passive auxiliary

Get with past participle

Get is often used, particularly in colloquial styles, as a passive auxiliary, in place of **be**. (see § 1.11.) As with other forms of the passive, passive sentences with get are mostly intransitive, though **get** can also be used in **ditransitive** passives (passives with an object) (Examples 6 - 8 below).

1. Sorry I'm late, the train **got** (was) delayed.
2. My grandfather **got** (was) killed in the war.
3. She's **getting** (being) driven to the ceremony in a big limousine.
4. Survival training includes **getting** (being) dropped in the middle of the desert.
5. We're **getting** (being) picked

For a full set of examples, see the full version of [A Descriptive Grammar of English](#) (ebook, paperback or hardback).

1.14.4. **Got to** - modal auxiliary

► For information on "got to" as a modal verb, see the following section Modals of obligation § 1.15.1.1.

1.15 Modal verbs of obligation

1.15.1.1 Firm obligation, etc. - **must** and **have to**

The verb **must** only exists in the *simple present* and *present perfect* forms.

While the **present** form can express obligation, necessity, certainty or strong probability, the **present perfect** forms *only* express a strongly felt opinion or supposition. See examples in section 1.15.1.2.

All persons	Present	Present perfect
Affirmative	must	must have
Negative	must not, mustn't	must not have, mustn't have

If other tenses are required, the speaker or writer must use forms of the synonymous modal verb "**have to**". This modal auxiliary has all normal tenses, including progressive or continuous forms; these are not common, but need to be used in some cases.

.....

The rest of the section on verbs is not included in this free sampler. This content can be seen in the full version of [A Descriptive Grammar of English](#), available from Amazon and good bookstores

1.16. Modal verbs of ability

1.17. Verbs of enabling and obligation,

1.18 Phrasal and prepositional verbs, and

1.19 Irregular verbs

2. The noun phrase

2.1. Nouns : what is a noun?

A **noun** is a lexical word that represents an **entity** (person, creature, object), a **substance**, a **process** (action, evolution) or an **abstraction** (idea, concept).

Nouns representing named person/s, entity, or place are called **proper** nouns and are **Capitalised**. Other nouns are known as or **common** nouns.

2.1.1. The classification of nouns

Every noun can be classified in three different ways.

Proper or common? Concrete or abstract? Count or non-count?

- **Proper nouns:** Nouns representing a named person entity, or place are called **proper** nouns and are **Capitalised**. We also call them "names". **Examples:** *Shakespeare, London, India, Mount Everest, the Titanic, the Olympics, Catholicism, Islam, Google, Gandalf*. They are usually concrete and uncountable. Other nouns are known as or **common** nouns.
- **Common nouns:** Nouns that denote entities or substances (even invisible or intangible substances such as air) are called **concrete nouns**; nouns denoting abstractions or processes are called **abstract nouns**.
- **Common nouns** designating items or abstractions that can be counted are known as **count nouns** (or *countable nouns*), and have both singular and plural forms. Nouns designating generalisations or substances are called **non-count nouns** (or *uncountable nouns*) and are normally only used in the singular.
- Almost all non-count nouns **can** also be used as count nouns in certain circumstances, though most often only in the singular. The distinction between count and non-count nouns is fundamental, as they are not used in the same way.
- ► For more on this see count and non-count nouns (§ 2.3.)

Common nouns	Count	Non-count
Concrete	car, cat, ball, man, table, engine, class, road, aeroplane,	water, potassium, cement, air, oil, whisky, concrete
Abstract	idea, noun, attitude, name, song, thought, opinion, victory, quantity, length, kilometre	patience, suspense, life, philosophy, music, , work, economics

Examples of non-count nouns being used as count nouns in defined circumstances:

The rest of this section is not included in this PDF sampler.

2.1.2. Nouns and gender

2.1.3. The formation of nouns

The content of these sections is not included in this PDF sampler.

2.1.4. Nouns in the plural

Pluralizing nouns in English is very simple. With just a few exceptions, the plural of all English nouns is formed by adding the letter "s".

Exceptions to the general principle:

Nouns in s, sh, ss, ch or z,

When the singular of an English noun ends in **s, sh, ss, ch** or **z**, the plural is normally formed by adding **-es**.

Examples: Bus > buses (not ~~busses~~ !), bush > bushes, match > matches, mass > masses, buzz > buzzes,

With some words ending in **s**, the plural and singular are identical.

Examples: A series > two series, a means > two means > a species > two species.

Nouns ending in -f.

With **some** (but not all) nouns ending in a single **-f**, the plural is formed by replacing the final **-f** by **-ves**.

Examples: Half > halves, hoof > hooves, thief > thieves but Roof > roofs, belief > beliefs

The same goes for words ending in **-fe** (or **-ef**).

Examples: Knife > knives, life > lives, thief > thieves... but chief, chiefs

Words ending in -is

With words like analysis, hypothesis, the plural is formed by replacing the final **-is** by **-es**, **Examples:** analysis > analyses, hypothesis > hypotheses, crisis > crises etc. Note how the plurals are pronounced:

Singular: ['krai sis], plural: ['krai si:z]

Some words derived directly or supposedly from Latin or Greek

In some cases, the original Latin or Greek ending is used.

Cactus > cacti, Medium > media, nucleus > nuclei, criterion > criteria, stimulus > stimuli etc.

A few irregular nouns

A very small number of common English nouns have irregular plurals. Man > men , woman > women , child > children, mouse > mice, foot > feet, tooth > teeth ...

Animals and fish

For some animals, some birds, and a lot of fish (including the word **fish**), the plural is - or may be - **the same** as the singular. Examples :

The rest of this section, and sections up to 2.2.2, are not included in this free sampler. This content can be seen in the full version of [A Descriptive Grammar of English](#), available from Amazon and good bookstores

(.... END OF SECTION 2.2.2.)

..... Put all this together, and we get a **complex noun group**, such as:

*The **nice old-fashioned police** inspector **with white hair, who was drinking his beer**, was Mr. Morse.*

2.2.3. Some common exceptions

Sometimes an adjective or an adjectival phrase will follow the noun, or appear to do so. There are three cases that need to be noted:

A very few adjectives always follow the noun: **concerned** (in the sense of "being talked about"), and **involved** (in the sense of "participating", or "being present") are the two common ones.

Other participial adjectives (such as **left, remaining, missing**) appear to be used as adjectives that follow the noun; in reality, they are elliptical forms of a relative clause that has become reduced to a single word.

Adjectives follow the noun when the adjectives themselves are post-modified (defined) by a following phrase.

Examples.

The examples for this section are not included in this PDF sampler

For more examples see § 2.9.3.1 Attributive adjectives

2.3. *Count nouns and non-count nouns*

In English, as in many other languages, nouns are divided into two categories, known as "**count nouns**" and "**non-count nouns**". It is important to distinguish between these two groups.

2.3.1. Count nouns

Sometimes called "countable nouns", these are nouns that refer to things that can be multiplied or counted, for example:

- **one man, two trees, three things, four faces, five films, six shops, seven sisters**, and so on.

2.3.2. Non-count nouns

These are nouns that refer to generalisations, abstractions, concepts or substances, things that cannot be put in the plural; for example.

- **water, oxygen, eternity, psychology, anger, politics, heat, alcohol....** and so on.

So far, so good! That is relatively simple to follow. **Concrete** objects and items can be counted, **concepts** and **abstractions** cannot. Unfortunately, this easy distinction does not take into account all nouns.

The Problem:

The problem is that there are a lot of nouns that are *either* **count nouns** or **non-count nouns**, depending on the circumstances.

2.3.3. Usage

Count nouns and **non-count** nouns are not used in the same way. Most importantly there are the questions of **determiners** or articles (*the, a, an, some* and *any*, etc.) and **quantifiers**. The essential rules are not complicated:

RULE 1 ►

Count nouns **must** have a determiner of some kind in the singular. **In the plural**, count nouns require a determiner if they are used with a restricted value, no determiner if they are used as generalisations.

Examples in the singular

You can say *a table, this table, my table, one table*, etc. but never just "table".

Examples in the plural

You say "tables" (or "all tables") if you mean *all tables in general*, but "the tables" or "these tables", etc., if you are referring to just *certain tables*, but *not all tables*.

Examples in context:

Usually, tables have flat surfaces, but **the tables** in this café don't.
Buses are big vehicles, but **the buses** in London are enormous.

RULE 2 ►

Non-count nouns do not have a determiner in the singular. They are **not used in the plural**

Example: *Oxygen is essential for life.*

In cases where non-count nouns are used with a determiner, this is because they are being used with a restricted or count value.

For example: **This oxygen is contaminated.**

2.3.4. **Problem:** nouns that are either count nouns or non count nouns

In their **non-count** form or value, these nouns are generalisations, in their **count noun** form or value their meaning is restricted or slightly different. Look at these examples:

We all like **beer**, so let's order **three beers**.

The other examples for this section are not included in this PDF sampler

.....

In the examples above, the first time the noun is used with a **non-count** generalising value, **beer, air, heat, philosophy**.

However the second time these nouns are used they have the restricted value of **count nouns**: for this reason, they must be introduced by a determiner; in the examples, the determiners are a numeral (*three*), two articles (*the*) and two demonstrative determiners (*this* and *that*).

three beers, the air in this room, the heat from that radiator, several different philosophies.

The fact that some nouns can have either a non-count value or a count value does not always mean that we can actually count them! **Many abstractions** cannot be put in the plural; for example

We **could never** say ~~There are two different airs in these two rooms.~~
we **cannot** say ~~musies or patiences~~
though as the examples show, we can say *several different philosophies*.

It is **context** that will usually indicate whether a noun is a **count noun** or a **non-count** noun.

2.3.5. Quantifiers with count and non-count nouns

The choice of certain quantifiers (▶ see § 2.6) such as *much / many, few / little, some* and *any* depends on whether a noun is a **count noun** or a **non-count** noun.

With **count nouns** in the **plural**, the quantifiers to use are *many, few / a few*, and *some**. Obviously, quantifiers cannot be used with **count nouns** in the singular.....

Examples:

The examples and the rest of this section, and up as far as section 2.2.4, are not included in this free sampler. This content can be found in the full version of [A Descriptive Grammar of English](#), available from Amazon and good bookstores.

2.4. Pronouns

Definition of a pronoun:

A **pronoun** is a little word that stands **in place of** a noun, a phrase or even a clause, in order to avoid repetition. It agrees in number and gender with the noun, phrase or clause that it replaces, which is called the *antecedent*. The pronoun refers to its logical antecedent in a sentence or paragraph, or in the context of dialogue. Within a sentence, the logical antecedent is most often the preceding or most recent noun. Occasionally the "antecedent" can come after the pronoun referring to it.

2.4.1. Personal pronouns

Sections 2.4.1 to 2.4.2.1 are not included in this free PDF sampler.

For details consult the full version available from [Amazon](#) and other bookstores (ebook, paperback or hardback)

2.4.2.2. Nominal relative pronouns - **What whatever** etc.

1. **What**

What is used as a "nominal relative pronoun" (also called "free relative pronoun"). It is a single word which combines the antecedent (stated or implied) *and* the relative pronoun. Thus it corresponds for instance, to French *ce que* or Spanish *lo que, el que* etc.

Examples

After **what** happened yesterday, you ought to be more careful.
You'll have to manage with **what** you can find.
What he said was rather interesting.

2. **Whoever, whatever, whichever**

Though they are less common than *what*, **whoever whatever** and **whichever** are all used as nominal personal pronouns, standing in the place of a noun + relative clause.

Examples

Whoever heard such a ridiculous argument?

Meaning: Is there any person who heard such a ridiculous argument?

Whoever....

For more examples, please consult the full edition of A Descriptive Grammar of English

2.4.2.3. *Relative adjectives*

1. *Whose, what and which*

Whose is the possessive relative adjective, as noted above. **What** and
The content of the rest of this section is not included in this PDF sampler.

2.4.2.4. *When, why, where and how*

Many students are surprised to learn that **when, why, where** and **how**, and also the longer forms **whenever, wherever** and **however**, also function as nominal relative pronouns.

The rest of this section is not included in this PDF sampler.

2.4.3. Relative adverb: **however**

However can also be used as a relative adverb, qualifying an adjective or adverb. **However** hard I try, I can't manage to find the right answer!

Meaning: I can't find the answer even if I try in ways which are very hard.

We'll have plenty of food **however** many people actually come.

Meaning: The number of people who come is not important, we'll have enough food for them.

2.4.4. Demonstrative pronouns and adjectives

2.4.4.1. Demonstrative pronouns

1. There are four demonstrative pronouns in English, two in the singular, and two in the plural; they indicate either proximity (**this, these**), or distance (**that, those**).

	Proximity	Distance
Singular	This	That
Plural	These	Those

It is important to understand what is meant by **proximity and distance**. The notion of proximity can be **grammatical** (referring to something close in the sentence), **spatial** (something close to the speaker) or **temporal** (close in time).

Examples

This is her car, and **that** (*further away*) is mine.

I don't like **these** (*in front of me*) but I do like **those** (*further away*).

Our car has broken down, and it's snowing. **This** (*the situation in which we find ourselves*) is not a good situation.

He wrote about many places, including some small Greek islands; **these** (*direct antecedent in the sentence*), he said, were his favourite places.

That (= *what you have just said*) is not a very intelligent idea.

2. Demonstrative pronouns **cannot** be preceded by adjectives nor by possessives, but **that** and **those** can be followed by prepositional phrases starting with **of** or **in** or other prepositions. See possessive structures below.

We cannot say *Peter's those*, nor *His that* nor *blue these*; we have to say *Those of Peter*, or *that one of his*, or *these blue ones*.

Sorry, the rest of this section, along with section 2.5. is not included in this sample edition.

They can be found in the full version available from [Amazon](#) and other bookstores (ebook, paperback or hardback)

2.6. Quantifiers

Definition

Quantifiers are a type of **determiner** which denote **imprecise** quantity. They modify nouns or pronouns. They differ from **numbers** or numerals which indicate precise quantity.

Before **pronouns**, quantifiers are always followed by **of**.

The most common quantifiers used in English are:

some / any , much, many, a lot, a few, several, enough.

2.6.1. **Some** and **any**, their compounds and other neutral quantifiers

In many cases, **some** is used as a plural indefinite article, the plural of "**a**" or "**an**"; but more often, **some** implies a limited quantity, and for this reason has the value of a neutral quantifier, neither big nor small nor specific.

Some is used in affirmative statements;

it is replaced with **any** in negative and interrogative contexts. **Examples:**

I've got **some** apples in my basket and **some** water in my bottle.

I haven't got **any** apples in my basket, nor **any** water in my bottle.....

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A Descriptive Grammar of English

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