

## Chapter 1

# I Already Know How to Talk. Why Should I Study Grammar?

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Distinguishing between the three Englishes
- ▶ Choosing language according to audience, message, and medium
- ▶ Using computer grammar checkers properly

**I**n the Middle Ages, *grammar* meant the study of Latin, the language of choice for educated people. In fact, grammar was so closely associated with Latin that the word referred to any kind of learning. This meaning of *grammar* shows up when people of grandparent-age and older talk about their *grammar school*, not their elementary school. The term *grammar school* is a leftover from the old days. The very old days.

These days *grammar* is the study of language, specifically, how words are put together. Because of obsessive English teachers and their rules, grammar also means a set of standards that you have to follow in order to speak and write better. However, the definition of *better* changes according to situation, purpose, and audience. In this chapter, I show you the difference between formal and informal English and explain when each is called for. I also tell you what your computer can and can't do to help you write proper English and give you some pointers about appropriate language for texting, tweeting, instant messaging, and similar technology.

## *Deciding Which Grammar to Learn*

I can hear the groan already. *Which* grammar? You mean there's more than one? Yes, there are actually several different types of grammar, including *historical* (how language has changed through the centuries) and *comparative* (how languages differ from or resemble each other). Don't despair; in *English Grammar For Dummies*, I deal with only two — the two you have to know in order to improve your speech and writing.

Descriptive grammar gives names to things — the parts of speech and parts of a sentence. When you learn descriptive grammar, you understand what every word is (its part of speech) and what every word does (its function in the sentence). If you're not careful, a study of descriptive grammar can go overboard fast, and you end up saying things like "*balloon*" is the object of the gerund, in a gerund phrase that is acting as the predicate nominative of the linking verb "appear." Never fear: I wouldn't dream of inflicting that level of terminology on you. However, there is one important reason to learn some grammar terms — to understand *why* a particular word or phrase is correct or incorrect.

Functional grammar makes up the bulk of *English Grammar For Dummies*. Functional grammar tells you how words behave when they are doing their jobs properly. Functional grammar guides you to the right expression — the one that fits what you're trying to say — by ensuring that the sentence is put together correctly. When you're agonizing over whether to say *I* or *me*, you're actually solving a problem of functional grammar.

So here's the formula for success: A little descriptive grammar plus a lot of functional grammar equals better grammar overall.

## *Distinguishing between the Three Englishes*

Good grammar sounds like a great idea, but *good* is tough to pin down. Why? Because the language of choice depends on your situation. Here's what I mean. Imagine that you're hungry. What do you say?

Wanna get something to eat?

Do you feel like getting a sandwich?

Will you accompany me to the dining room?

These three statements illustrate the three Englishes of everyday life. I call them friendspeak, conversational English, and formal English.

Before you choose, you need to know where you are and what's going on. Most important, you need to know your audience.

## Phat grammar

Psst! Want to be in the in-crowd? Easy. Just create an out-crowd and you're all set. How do you create an out-crowd? Manufacture a special language (slang) with your friends that no one else understands, at least until the media picks it up. It's the ultimate friendspeak. You and your pals are on the inside, talking about a *sketchy neighborhood* (*sketchy* means "dangerous"). Everyone else is on the outside, wondering how to get the 411 (information). Should you use slang in your writing? Probably not, unless you're dealing with a good friend. The goal of writing and speaking is communication,

and slang may be a mystery to your intended audience. Also, because slang changes so quickly, even a short time after you've written something, the meaning may be obscure. Instead of cutting-edge, you sound dated.

When you talk or write in slang, you also risk sounding uneducated. In fact, sometimes breaking the usual rules is the point of slang. In general, you should make sure that your readers know that you understand the rules before you start breaking them (the rules, not the readers) safely.

## *Wanna get something to eat? Friendspeak*

*Friendspeak* is informal and filled with slang. Its sentence structure breaks all the rules that English teachers love. It's the language of *I know you and you know me and we can relax together*. In friendspeak the speakers are on the same level. They have nothing to prove to each other, and they're comfortable with each other's mistakes. In fact, they make some mistakes on purpose, just to distinguish their personal conversation from what they say on other occasions. Here's a conversation in friendspeak:

Me and him are going to the gym. Wanna come?

He's like, I did 60 push-ups, and I'm like, no way.

I doubt that the preceding conversation makes perfect sense to many people, but the participants understand it quite well. Because they both know the whole situation (the guy they're talking about gets muscle cramps after 4 seconds of exercise), they can talk in shorthand.

I don't deal with friendspeak in this book. You already know it. In fact, you've probably created a version of it with your best buds.

## *Do you feel like getting a sandwich?* **Conversational English**

A step up from friendspeak is *conversational English*. Although not quite friendspeak, conversational English includes some friendliness. Conversational English doesn't stray too far from your English class rules, but it does break some. You can relax, but not completely. It's the tone of most everyday speech, especially between equals. Conversational English is — no shock here — usually for conversations, not for writing. Specifically, conversational English is appropriate in these situations:

- ✓ Chats with family members, neighbors, acquaintances
- ✓ Informal conversations with teachers and co-workers
- ✓ Friendly conversations (if there are any) with supervisors
- ✓ Notes, e-mails, instant messages, and texts to friends
- ✓ Comments in Internet chat rooms, bulletin boards, and so on
- ✓ Friendly letters to relatives

Conversational English has a breezy sound. Letters are dropped in contractions (*don't, I'll, would've*, and so forth). You may also skip words (*Got a minute? Be there soon!* and similar expressions), especially if you're writing in electronic media with a tight space requirement. (For more on electronic communication, see "Thumbing Your Way to Better Grammar" later in this chapter.) In written form, conversational English relaxes the punctuation rules, too. Sentences run together, dashes connect all sorts of things, and half sentences pop up regularly. I'm using conversational English to write this book because I'm pretending that I'm chatting with you, the reader, not teaching grammar in a classroom situation.

## *Will you accompany me to the dining room?* **Formal English**

You're now at the pickiest end of the language spectrum: formal, grammatically correct speech and writing. Formal English displays the fact that you have an advanced vocabulary, a knowledge of etiquette, and command of standard rules of English usage. You may use formal English when you have less power, importance, and/or status than the other person in the conversation. Formal English shows that you've trotted out your best behavior in his or her honor. You may also speak or write in formal English when you have *more* power, importance, and/or status than the other person. The goal of using formal English is to impress, to create a tone of dignity, or to provide a suitable role model for someone who is still learning. Situations that call for formal English include:

- ✓ Business letters or e-mails (from or between businesses as well as from individuals to businesses)
- ✓ Letters or e-mails to government officials
- ✓ Office memos or e-mails
- ✓ Reports
- ✓ Homework
- ✓ Communications to teachers
- ✓ Speeches, presentations, oral reports
- ✓ Important conversations (for example, job interviews, college interviews, parole hearings, congressional inquiries, inquisitions, sessions with the principal in which you explain that unfortunate incident with the stapler, and so on)

Think of formal English as a business suit. If you're in a situation where you want to look your best, you're also in a situation where your words matter. In business, homework, or any situation in which you're being judged, use formal English.

## Using the Right English at the Right Time

Which type of English do you speak? Friendspeak, conversational English, or formal English? Probably all of them. (See preceding section for more information.) If you're like most people, you switch from one to another without thinking, dozens of times each day. Chances are, the third type of English — formal English — is the one that gives you the most trouble. In fact, it's probably why you bought this book. (Okay, there is one more possibility that I haven't mentioned yet. Maybe your nerdy uncle, the one with ink stains on his nose, gave *English Grammar For Dummies* to you for Arbor Day and you're stuck with it. But you're not playing paintball or listening to your favorite indie band right now, so you must be reading the book. Therefore, you've at least acknowledged that you have something to think about, and I'm betting that it's formal English.) All the grammar lessons in this book deal with formal English because that's where the problems are fiercest and the rewards for knowledge are greatest.



Which is correct?

A. Hi, Ms. Sharkface! What's up? Here's the 411. I didn't do no homework last night — too much going on. Ttyl. Love, Ralph

B. Dear Ms. Sharkface,

Just a note to let you know that I've got no homework today. Had a lot to do last night! I'll explain later!

Your friend,

Ralph

C. Dear Ms. Sharkface:

I was not able to do my homework last night because of other pressing duties. I will speak with you about this matter later.

Sincerely,

Ralph

Answer: The correct answer depends upon a few factors. How willing are you to be stuck in the corner of the classroom for the rest of the year? If your answer is “very willing,” send note A, which is written in friendspeak. (By the way, “ttyl” means “talk to you later.”) Does your teacher come to school in jeans and sneakers? If so, note B is acceptable. Note B is written in conversational English. Is your teacher prim and proper, expecting you to follow the Rules? If so, note C, which is written in formal English, is your best bet.

## *Thumbing Your Way to Better Grammar*

I live in New York City, and I seldom see thumbs that aren't glued to very small keyboards — texting (sending written notes over the phone), IMing (instant messaging), twittering (sending 140-character notes), or simply jotting down ideas and reminders. I can't help wondering what sort of grammar will evolve from these new forms of communication. Perhaps the ninth edition of *English Grammar For Dummies* will be only ten pages long, with “sentences” like *u ok?* and *g2g — bbl*. (Translation for the techno-challenged: “Are you okay?” and “I have got to go. I'll be back later.”) If it's up to me, however, English will evolve this way “omdb” (“over my dead body”).

At present, however, match the level of formality in electronic communication to your situation, message, and audience. If you're dealing with a friend, feel free to abbreviate and shorten anything you like. If you're communicating with a co-worker or an acquaintance, conversational English is probably fine, though the more power the recipient has, the more careful you should be. (For more information on conversational English, check out “Distinguishing between the Three Englishes” earlier in this chapter.) When you're unsure of your audience or writing to a stranger or a superior, play it safe and opt for formal English. Proper grammar is, well, proper for all media.

## *Relying on Computer Grammar Checkers Is Not Enough*

Your best friend — the one who's greasing the steps to the cafeteria while you're reading *English Grammar For Dummies* — may tell you that learning correct grammar in the third millennium is irrelevant because computer grammar checkers make human knowledge obsolete. Your friend is wrong about the grammar programs, and the grease is a very bad idea also.

It is comforting to think that a little green or red line will tell you when you've made an error and that a quick mouse-click will show you the path to perfection. Comforting, but unreal. English has a half million words, and you can arrange those words a couple of gazillion ways. No program can catch all of your mistakes, and most programs identify errors that aren't actually wrong.

Spelling is also a problem. Every time I type *verbal*, the computer squawks. But *verbal* — a grammar term meaning a word that comes from a verb but does not function as a verb — is a real word. Nor can the computer tell the difference between *homonyms* — words that sound alike but have different meanings and spelling. For example, if I type

Eye through the bawl at hymn, but it went threw the window pain instead.

the computer underlines nothing. However, I was actually trying to say

I threw the ball at him, but it went through the window pane instead.

In short, the computer knows some grammar and spelling, but you have to know the rest.

## *What's Your Problem? Solutions to Your Grammar Gremlins*

I love to stroll around my neighborhood pondering prepositions. (Okay, I'm lying. Most of the time I'm actually thinking about my favorite television shows or Yankee relief pitching.) With my head in the clouds, I sometimes stub my toe on a sidewalk crack. Once I know where the cracks are, however, I can avoid them. If you can figure out where the cracks are in your *grammatical neighborhood* — the gremlins likely to catch your toes — your sentences will roll along without risk of falling flat. Table 1.1 shows common usage problems and the location of their solutions. Skim the first column until you recognize something that stumps you. Then turn to the chapter listed in the second column.