

Grammar Practice

GRAMMAR uses form and sequence to assist the user in maintaining clarity and intention. It also communicates to the reader or listener that the sender of the message is a clear and logical thinker. The proper use of grammar indicates that an individual has been properly educated.



Objective:



Explain basic grammar and how to use it to create strong sentences and a successful piece of writing.

Key Terms:



collective noun

main clause

parenthetical phrase

complete sentence

parallel construction

strong sentence

Understanding Grammar

Much of the day-to-day communication in a law office is through writing. Memos, deposition summaries, pleadings, and research reports are common paralegal tasks. Therefore, knowing proper grammar is essential.

BASIC GRAMMAR

Basic grammar includes understanding subject-verb agreement and parallel construction.

Agreement

A compound subject almost always uses a plural verb, except when the elements refer to the same entity or if the elements are preceded by “each” or “every.” The following two sentences are examples: The chicken and beef go in the refrigerator. The crackers and cheese go on the serving platter.

Alternative Subjects

When two subjects are linked by or, nor, or but, the verb agrees with the part closest to it. The following two sentences are examples of alternative subjects: Neither Jim nor Jake is going to drive. I like the rain, but he does not.

Parenthetical Phrases

Distractions are often caused by parenthetical nouns, modifiers, and predicate nouns. It is necessary to disregard a **parenthetical phrase** (a digression often for clarification) when determining the form of the verb. The following is an example: The whole estate, including the barns, is to be sold.

Inverted Subject-Verb Order

The order of the sentence can be reversed to make it more clear, which makes it easier to select a verb form (e.g., Into each manuscript went reams of paper.).

Collective Noun

A **collective noun** is a collection of people, places, or things taken as a unit (e.g., a team or a group). It is essential to consider if the focus is on the whole or its parts when determining the verb form (e.g., The crowd was getting restless.).

Quantity

Money, time, and distance are treated as singular. Examples include the following sentences: Six dollars an hour is a fair childcare wage. Four hours per day is how long he works.

Collective Pronouns

Collective pronouns (e.g., each, every, either, neither, everything, everyone, everybody, anyone, and anybody) are singular in construction, even though they refer to groups. All, more, most, some, any, and none require the plural form when a group is the reference and the singular form when a whole is the reference.

Parallel Construction

Parallel construction is a format in which sentences or words (e.g., in an outline) are in the same structure or tense. It is all about consistency of voice, person, tense, and parts of speech. Sometimes parallelism is disregarded to add emphasis and style, but it is important not to sacrifice clarity for pizzazz. Phrases within a sentence must have the same grammatical pattern or number.

Complete Thought

A complete thought needs a complete sentence. A **complete sentence** is a grammatical unit that expresses a complete thought and usually has a subject and a predicate. A complete

sentence has three characteristics: It begins with a capital letter; it has end mark punctuation; and it contains at least one main clause. A **main clause** is an independent subject and verb that expresses a complete thought.

Capitalization and Punctuation

Basic capitalization rules must be followed. See the summary at <http://www.grammarbook.com/punctuation/capital.asp> for more detail. Also, punctuation can change the meaning or emphasis of a sentence. Comma placement, for example, is of particular importance.

Modifiers

Modifier placement can be tricky. A modifier is a word that provides a description of another word in the sentence. Since it is describing something, the modifier should be in close vicinity to the word it is describing, so it does not “dangle.”

SUCCESSFUL PIECE OF WRITING

Good writing starts with sound basics—the simple but strong sentence. A **strong sentence** is a grammatical unit with a complete thought that communicates clearly with the fewest number of words possible. It is precise and concise. Fewer words imply that the words chosen must be the correct words and not poor imitators. Real sentence clarity is easily recognized because the reader can infer only one message from the sentence. Therefore, only one interpretation is possible.

Paragraph

A paragraph is a collection of related sentences dealing with a single topic. The basic rule is to keep one idea to one paragraph. The elements of a paragraph are as follows:

- ◆ Unity—The paragraph is single focused.
- ◆ Coherence—There are logical bridges to thoughts.
- ◆ Topic sentence—An idea or thesis of the paragraph is present.
- ◆ Adequately developed—The idea is presented completely for the context.



FIGURE 1. Great writing uses building blocks—organized and planned in a strategic way to communicate complex ideas and thoughts.



FURTHER EXPLORATION...

ONLINE CONNECTION: Legal Writing

Consult several legal writing sites, including <http://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/academic-programs/legal-writing-scholarship/writing-center/upload/grammar.pdf>, <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/>, and <http://www.netplaces.com/paralegal/what-is-a-paralegal/skills-of-a-successful-paralegal.htm>. Study each of them. Then create a poster summarizing the key features from each and common to each. The goal of the poster is to demonstrate the answer to this question: What does great legal writing look like? Share your poster with the class, and create mini-summaries of the poster to be used as a study aid by your classmates.

Role and Purpose

A successful piece of writing succeeds in its job. Pieces of communication have different roles and purposes. For instance, some pieces are used to ask for information, share information, develop scenarios, communicate, lay out situations, demand retribution, and—in law—present and/or defend a position.

Dictation and Drafting

As a paralegal, you will have a great deal of communications dictated to you. At some point, however, it is likely that you will be charged with drafting communications (e.g., letters, pleadings, or interrogatories) on your own for attorney review. These documents should reflect a level of professionalism. Therefore, poor grammar and weak writing skills can prevent you from advancing.

Professional Development

You must regularly complete ongoing professional development or complete continuing education units (CEUs) for certification. Consider completing a grammar and writing review course as needed. Many are available online and through community colleges.

Summary:



Basic grammar includes understanding subject-verb agreement and parallel construction. Compound subjects, inverted subject-verb order, collective nouns, and pronouns are key elements to master. Also, a complete sentence has three characteristics: It begins with a capital letter; it has end mark punctuation; and it contains at least one main clause. A main clause contains an independent subject and verb and expresses a complete thought. Good writing starts with sound basics—the simple but strong sentence. A strong sentence communicates clearly with the fewest num-

ber of words possible. It is precise and concise. Fewer words imply that the words chosen must be the correct words and not poor imitators. For instance, real sentence clarity is easily recognized. The reader can infer only one message from the sentence. A successful piece of writing succeeds in its job.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. List the parts of speech.
2. Explain the elements of a paragraph.
3. Define a complete sentence.
4. List five common grammatical errors.
5. List 10 places or situations where capital letters would be used.

Expanding Your Knowledge:



Review paralegal blogs for issues about grammar and writing. Then create a summary to share with the class.

Web Links:



Consequences of Bad Legal Writing

http://paralegaltoday.com/issue_archive/columns/LglWrtng_ma07.htm

Grammar Rules

http://www.grammarbook.com/english_rules.asp

Guide to Grammar and Writing

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/>