



GRAMMAR 101

Instructor: Erin K. Brown

LESSON #5

Parts of Speech II

Introduction

In the previous lesson, we reviewed nouns, pronouns, and adjectives. We discussed their function within the sentence and that function can also require the use of certain punctuation marks. Remember to study the sections in *The Chicago Manual of Style* I provide.

In this lesson, we'll wrap up our review of the remaining parts of speech: verbs, adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions.

Verbs (CMOS 5.97–155)

Verbs have the power to confound even the most prolific writers—not because of their function necessarily but because of confusion over which tense to use and how to structure tense sequence. Further perplexing the situation is that some people insist that a good writer should never use any of the *be*-verbs (*am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been*), which can make the sentence passive. But passive is correct when the subject of the verb is unknown, indefinite, or unimportant. According to Amy Einsohn in *The Copyeditor's Handbook*, “The passive is also preferable when the result of the activity is more important than the performer . . . Unpleasant messages are often framed in the passive.”

Active is preferable over passive, but passive should be used in the above situations. Thoughtful use/placement of passive gives a welcome break to constant active voice. In addition, sometimes a sentence requires a *be*-verb when the subject is linked with the predicate.

Whenever I encounter a regular verb used in an irregular form, my geek radar goes off (CMOS 5.101). For example, the misuse of *sneak* is one of my pet peeves. The past tense, *sneaked*, is standard and therefore preferred, but the nonstandard *snuck* has sneaked into regular use! As I mentioned previously, language evolves, and I fear that *snuck* may become standard—a result of its persistent misuse. My point is to encourage you to know the principal parts of verbs and use them correctly. It may be a tedious task to learn them, but editors must know the correct use of language. Simply put, that's the backbone of our skills.

Let's delve a bit deeper into the expansive world of verbs. The tense of a verb indicates the time of the action or condition expressed by the verb. English has six tenses. Study the conjugation chart below.

VERB TENSES

Indicative Mood, Active Voice

Conjugation of the Verb *See*

Principal Parts

Present	Present Participle	Past	Past Participle
see	seeing	saw	seen

PRESENT TENSE

A current act or condition

First person:	I see	we see
Second person:	you see	you see
Third person:	he, she, it sees	they see

Present progressive: * I am seeing, etc.

Present emphatic: I do see, etc.

PAST TENSE

An act or condition that occurred at a specific time in the past.

First person:	I saw	we saw
Second person:	you saw	you saw
Third person:	he, she, it saw	they saw

Past progressive: I was seeing, etc.

Past emphatic: I did see, etc.

FUTURE TENSE

(will or shall plus the present tense)

An act or condition that will occur some time in the future.

First person:	I will (shall) see	we will (shall) see
Second person:	you will see	you will see
Third person:	he, she, it will see	they will see

Future progressive: I shall be seeing, etc.

PRESENT PERFECT

(have or has plus the past participle)

An act or condition that occurred at an indefinite time in the past, or one that began in the past and continues in the present.

First person:	I have seen	we have seen
Second person:	you have seen	you have seen
Third person:	he, she, it has seen	they have seen

Present perfect progressive: I have been seeing, etc.

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PAST PERFECT
(had plus the past participle)

An act completed or a condition existing in the past before some other specific time in the past.

First person:	I had seen	we had seen
Second person:	you had seen	you had seen
Third person:	he, she, it had seen	they had seen

Past perfect progressive: I had been seeing, etc.

FUTURE PERFECT
(will have or shall have plus the past participle)

An act that will be completed or a condition that will exist before some other specific time in the future.

First person:	I will (shall) have seen	we will (shall) have seen
Second person:	you will have seen	you will have seen
Third person:	he, she, it will have seen	they will have seen

Future perfect progressive: I shall have been seeing, etc.

*Progressive: Action that continuously extends over a period of time.

Present Infinitive: to see
Present Gerund: seeing
Perfect Infinitive: to have seen
Perfect Gerund: having seen
Perfect Participle: having seen

Adapted from Gerald P. Mulderig, *The Heath Handbook*, 13th ed. (D. C. Heath and Company, 1995).

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Tense Sequence

One other area we need to cover is tense sequence—something editors must know to ensure correct tenses are used. Just about anything you read contains verbs in different tenses:

I *sat* in the quiet of our family room. The ceiling fan gently *hummed*, *staving* off the desert heat already heavy that May day. Twenty-month-old Sarah *played* contentedly with her Duplos, while three-month-old Will *napped* in his playpen, *surrounded* by crocheted blankets and his cuddly stuffed puppy. I quickly *dismissed* the thought that I *should clean* the house. I *wanted* nothing more than to *revel* in unmitigated pleasure of the family God *had blessed* me with. Norman Rockwell *would not have been able to resist painting* our contented scene.

The trick is figuring out which tenses should follow others. A logical relationship must exist between dependent and independent clauses, as well as between verbals (words that look like verbs but function otherwise) and main verbs. For example:

Wrong: When my grandfather *died*, I *learned* how much he *did* for the community.

Correct: When my grandfather *died*, I *learned* how much he *had done* [before his death] for the community.

Let's begin with the sequence of tenses in dependent clauses. I can't give you any rule to follow to determine what tense must be used in which sequence. You'll have to use the sense of the sentence as your guide. I'll give you some examples that demonstrate the possibilities.

MAIN VERB IN PRESENT TENSE

Both the main verb and dependent clause verb are in the present tense because the sentence states two recurring and concurring actions.

The car *stops* when [every time] I *press* the brake.

MAIN VERB IN PAST TENSE

When the main verb is past tense, the dependent clause verb is often also in the past tense. The sentence gives the sense of two actions that happened and concluded very close to the same time in the past.

The car *stopped* when I *pressed* the brake.

Here the main verb is past tense, but the dependent clause is in the past perfect. In this case, the action of the verb in the dependent clause took place before the action of the main verb.

The car *stopped* after I *had pressed* the brake.

In this next sentence, the main verb is in the past tense and the dependent is in the present. The dependent clause states a condition that is true regardless of the time. This is sometimes referred to as timeless present.

The car *stopped* working, even though it *is* brand-new.

MAIN VERB IN FUTURE TENSE

The verb in the independent clause is future tense, and the dependent clause verb is present tense. The sense is that if I do [present] something, then something will happen [future].

The car *will start* when I *turn* the key.

Again, the main verb is future, but in this example, the dependent clause verb is present perfect, *have turned*, and indicates an action that will occur before the action of the main verb.

The car *will start* once I *have turned* the key.

MAIN VERB IN PRESENT PERFECT TENSE

A present perfect main verb usually indicates that the independent clause verb will be in the past tense. The past tense *turned* indicates a past action that was completed in the past—it does not continue into the present—but the main verb in this sentence, *has started*, is a past action that has continued into the present.

The car *has started* because I *turned* the key.

MAIN VERB IN PAST PERFECT TENSE

A past perfect verb in the independent clause usually requires a past tense verb in the dependent clause. In this sentence, *had started* indicates past action that happened before the action *turned* in the dependent clause.

The car *had started* before I *turned* the key.

MAIN VERB IN FUTURE PERFECT TENSE

If the main verb is future perfect, the dependent clause verb is usually present or present perfect tense. In this sentence, the action of the independent clause happens before the action of the dependent clause.

The car *will have started* by the time I *turn* [or *have turned*] the key.

LOGICAL TIME RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VERBALS AND MAIN VERBS

Use present infinitive (*to see, to run, etc.*) to express action that occurs at the same time or later as that of the main verb.

He *gave* me a lot *to think* about.

Adverbs (CMOS 5.156–171)

Adverbs modify verbs. Many adverbs end in *-ly*, but not all *-ly* words are adverbs. Some writers advocate *never* using adverbs in writing. Using adverbs is unavoidable and even necessary in writing; however, I agree that it is vital to use vivid, descriptive verbs and not to rely on adverbs to convey particular action, which weakens the action. Action keeps readers engaged, and the editor's job is to help the author do that. I also believe in minimal use of the adverbs *very, quite, actually, just, literally, etc.* Their overuse has weakened their intent.

Which of the following sentences creates greater action and more interest?

I *ran quickly* down the road.

I *scampered* down the road. (or *raced, dashed, sprinted, sped, etc.*)

The second one, of course. Vivid verbs help readers experience the action.

Though to use or not to use adverbs isn't a *hotly* debated issue, some writers, like Mr. Deckers, are so adamant about not using adverbs they have a tendency to throw out the baby with the bathwater. (I couldn't have written that last sentence—or this one—without using adverbs.) Good, clear writing includes the use of adverbs. The key is when, where, which ones, and how to use them.

As an editor, you must spot lazy writing. Writers need to be aware of this potential problem and choose vivid words. The authors and project managers you work for will appreciate your having their best interests at heart. Equally important, the readers will benefit from your editing out lazy writing, making their reading experience richer.

While we're on adverbs, I can't help but address the common misplacement of *only*. Though I've never kept track, I think I've corrected the placement of *only* more than any other edit.

In most cases, we have some flexibility in placing adverbs in sentences. There is no confusion about these two sentences' meanings or that *reluctantly* modifies *gave*.

The girl *reluctantly* gave a speech.

The girl gave a speech *reluctantly*.

This isn't the case for *only*.

Only I drive red cars. (No one else drives them.)

I **only** drive red cars. (I do not park them, push them, wash them, etc.)

I drive **only** red cars. (I do not drive any other color cars.)

I drive red-**only** cars. (I do not drive multicolored cars.)

I drive red cars **only**. (I do not drive red motorcycles, red boats, etc.)

(Adapted from: <http://www.shearsoneditorial.com/2012/02/adverb-placement-predominantly-mainly-mostly/>)

I'm sure you see that the correct placement of *only* is vital to the meaning of the sentence.

You'll find additional discussion about adverbs in *CMOS* 5.156–171. Please take the time to read and study this section. You'll gain a greater understanding of adverbs and their use.

(We will cover misplaced modifiers in a future chapter.)

Prepositions (*CMOS* 5.172–195)

Prepositions show how a noun or a pronoun is related to some other word in the sentence. A prepositional phrase consists of a preposition, the object, and any modifiers of the object. A prepositional phrase functions as an adjective or adverb, and occasionally as a noun (which means it acts in the sentence any way a noun can).

This type of construction sometimes fools writers:

Wrong: A container of books are in the way.

Correct: A container of books is in the way.

Container is the subject. It is singular and takes a singular verb. The object of the preposition, *books*, is plural and precedes the verb, which is where the writer is fooled into thinking “books are in the way.” Remove the prepositional phrase and you have “A container is in the way.” Be on the lookout for this problem. It's easy to miss.

No doubt you've heard that it's wrong to end a sentence with a preposition. Well, that's a grammarian myth. Let's do a little test. If I were to ask you, “What did you sleep on?” would you find it an unusual construction? Probably not. But if I were to believe in not putting a preposition at the end of the sentence, I'd have to say, “On what did you sleep?” Though it may be grammatically perfect, no one speaks like that.

The formal narration might use this type of construction. You might want to adhere to this “rule” if the piece you're editing is formal (cover letters, business documents, proposals, etc.) because the person reading it may be put off if you end a sentence with a preposition.

Sometimes I'll turn on the closed caption while watching television. Many forensic and crime shows are the worst for using the phrase “What you got?” It amazes me that these intelligent

“scientists” who outsmart bad guys in forty-five minutes don’t use proper grammar . . . but I digress. Every once in a while a phrase will flash on the closed caption that illustrates when it’s wrong to end a sentence with a preposition. You’ve probably heard someone say this too: “Where are you at?” If we drop the sentence-ending preposition, the meaning of the sentence does not change: “Where are you?” This is a case when you’d delete the superfluous preposition.

The list found in *CMOS* 5.195 is invaluable. Keep it handy and refer to it often.

Conjunctions (*CMOS* 5.196–205)

A conjunction joins together words or word groups such as sentences, clauses, phrases, and words. *CMOS* covers what you need to know about conjunctions, but I will add a bit about beginning a sentence with a conjunction. Though some writers and editors try to convince us that this practice is forbidden, it’s not. I don’t suggest it in formal writing or when writing instruction manuals/sheets. I would also discourage beginning a sentence with a conjunction if that sentence begins a new chapter or a scene in a novel. Other than that, it’s okay. Just be judicious in the practice.

Interjections (*CMOS* 5.206–209)

The final part of speech hardly seems to be a part of speech: interjections. It is noted with an exclamation point: ! Here’s what *CMOS* 5.208 adds:

Because interjections are usually grammatically independent of the rest of the sentence, all other parts of speech may be used as interjections. A word that is classified as some other part of speech but used with the force of an interjection is called an exclamatory noun, exclamatory adjective, etc. Some examples are good! (adjective); idiot! (noun); help! (verb); indeed! (adverb); me! (pronoun); and! (conjunction); quickly! (adverb).

Summary

Whew! We covered a lot of ground in these past two lessons, but you made it all the way through. Congratulations!

In them we addressed all eight parts of speech, spending quite a bit of time in Lesson 5 on verb tenses and adverbs. You will likely refer to the Verb Tense chart often in the beginning months of your editing career. I sometimes have to consult it even now, so I keep mine handy. I have the preposition list in *CMOS* marked with a Post-it so I can quickly turn to it when needed.

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LESSON #5 ASSIGNMENTS

Access the Lesson 5 Assignments file.