



# In the Service of *Good Writing*

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*If you went to public school in the United States in the 1960s or later, you probably did not have much formal instruction in English grammar. I have helped many people achieve dramatic improvements in their writing skills simply by having them review the parts of speech and learn some simple rules of Standard English syntax. It's particularly important for editors to be conversant with these rules. This knowledge will enable you to decide what editorial changes are truly necessary and to explain the need for those changes to your authors. "In the Service of Good Writing" is a new Journal series designed to show writers and editors how to use the mechanics of Standard English to improve clarity and style.*

## Word Order and Prepositional Phrases

Some musicians naturally have perfect pitch, and some writers naturally have a knack for putting words in a logical order. Somehow, the naturally gifted writers have spontaneously absorbed the rules of Standard English syntax. They automatically put each modifier in exactly the right place, so that it modifies exactly what it's supposed to modify. As a result, their writing is clear and easy to read.

Even if you don't have that natural gift, you can improve your prose style by learning and applying some simple rules for how and where to use modifiers. I have seen people improve their prose style dramatically within a matter of days after I taught them these rules. The simplest of these rules deals with prepositional phrases.

If you put a prepositional phrase in the wrong place, it can change from adverbial to adjectival (or vice versa). Even if the phrase is clearly adverbial, it can still end up modifying the wrong thing if you put it in the wrong place. As a result, the sentence won't say what you mean it to say.

## Adjectival or Adverbial?

Prepositional phrases can act as adjectives or adverbs. Adjectives can modify a noun, pronoun, or other substantive (ie, something that acts as a noun). Adjectives pose or answer such questions as *what kind* or *how many*. Adverbs are much more versatile. They can modify verbs (including infinitives and participles), adjectives, other adverbs, prepositions, phrases, clauses, or whole sentences. Adverbs pose or answer such questions as *how*, *when*, *where*, *why*, or *how often*.

If you put a prepositional phrase directly after a noun, it will sound as if it is modifying that noun, whether you want it to or not. In other words, it will sound adjectival. Here's an example.

**This product is available from Acme Distributors in 10-mL bottles.**

How on earth did they get the distributors to fit into those tiny bottles? Here's a better way to say it:

**This product is available in 10-mL bottles from Acme Distributors.**

The misplaced prepositional phrase in that example sounds silly, but ordinary readers will figure out the meaning of the sentence anyway. That's because they have enough of what artificial intelligence researchers call common-sense knowledge to know that products, not distributors, are found in bottles. It may take your readers an extra fraction of a second to decipher what you meant; but as long as you are writing about commonplace things, they can usually figure it out. Unfortunately, medical writing often deals with things that are not commonplace, and about which no one has commonsense knowledge. In that situation, the reader needs every contextual clue you can provide.

## Misplaced Adverbial Phrases

Even if a phrase is clearly adverbial, it can still modify the wrong thing if you put it in the wrong place. That's because adverbs are so versatile. They can modify almost anything. See how much trouble even a clearly adverbial phrase can cause if it's put in the wrong place:

**She decided to abstain from drinking after going to church.**

The prepositional phrase *after going to church* is clearly adverbial, because it specifies when something happened. However, the rest of this sentence contains 3 verbal elements: 2 verbs (one in the past tense and one infinitive) and a gerund (an "-ing" noun made from a present participle). If you put the adverbial phrase after the gerund, it sounds as if you want it to modify the gerund. It sounds as if she's still drinking, but not on her way home from church. If you want the adverbial phrase to modify the main verb in the sentence, either put it directly after that verb or put it at the beginning of the sentence.

**She decided, after going to church, to abstain from drinking.**

**After going to church, she decided to abstain from drinking.**

Although both of these revised sentences are better than the original, because it's clear which verb the adverbial phrase is modifying, they still leave something to be desired.

# AMWA Puzzler

Developed by Laura Ninger, ELS, Rutherford, NJ

They simply explain *when* she made a decision, not *why* she made it or *how well* she followed through with it. Good technical writing would clarify those issues, if they are relevant.

## Improving Your Skills

I have seen people make dramatic and lasting improvements in their writing abilities, virtually overnight, as a result of studying the parts of speech and learning a few simple rules of syntax. Back when I was responsible for training copyeditors and proofreaders, I asked new employees to spend their first few days on the job reviewing Capital Community College's Guide to Grammar and Writing (<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/index.htm>). I asked them to read the discussions, take the quizzes, and watch the presentation on how to diagram sentences. I told them that when they encounter a confusing or ugly sentence while editing, they should try diagramming it. If they can't figure out what parts of speech a word can be, they should look it up in *Merriam-Webster* ([www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)).

If you are self-employed or are working somewhere that doesn't have a formal training program, you'll need to develop your own curriculum. I strongly recommend that you include something that has quizzes with answers, so that you can test your skills. The sidebar lists some further references that might be useful.

Even naturally gifted writers can benefit from learning the rules of syntax, especially if they become editors. This knowledge gives the editor a rational basis for deciding whether any particular editorial change is truly necessary. It also enables the editor to justify his or her changes to an author. Editors who can provide this kind of explanation for any change they recommend will earn the respect of most authors. This kind of feedback also helps the authors become better writers, which saves us all time and hassle in the long run!

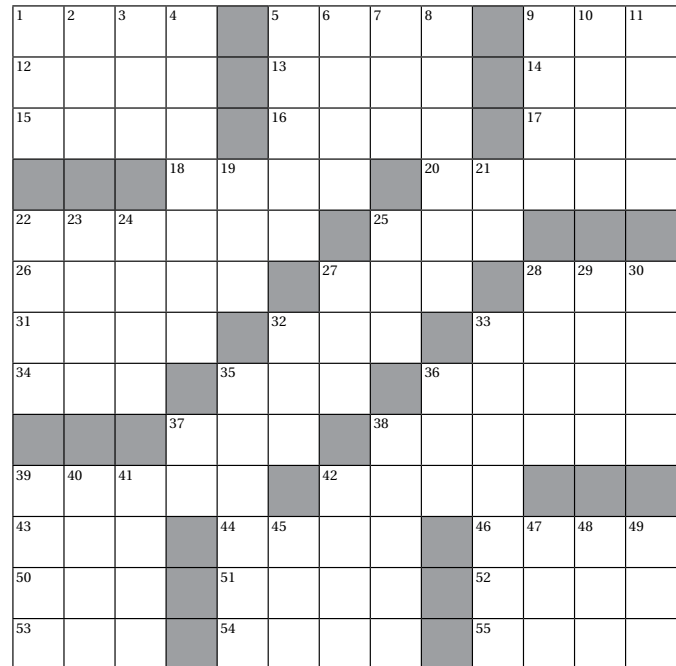
Capital Community College's Guide to Grammar and Writing:  
<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/index.htm>

Free-ed.net's English Grammar and Mechanics:  
[http://www.free-ed.net/free-ed/Humanities/EnglishG&C/Grammar\\_Level2.asp](http://www.free-ed.net/free-ed/Humanities/EnglishG&C/Grammar_Level2.asp)

The Tongue Untied:  
<http://www.grammaruntied.com>

Perfect Your English's English Grammar Lessons:  
<http://www.perfectyourengish.com>

If you have found a valuable online resource, please send it to the AMWA Journal Editor at [amwajournaleditor@editorialrx.com](mailto:amwajournaleditor@editorialrx.com).



## ACROSS

1. Writing sample
5. Cicatrice
9. Common ISP
12. List of choices
13. Word before "blue"
14. Font style (abbr.)
15. Action word
16. Culture medium
17. Ref. book
18. Of eye or camera
20. Remove, electronically
22. Moral principles
25. 1 cGy
26. Spooky author?
27. "I" follower
28. Imaging technol.
31. "Quick" punctuation?
32. Gov. health agency
33. Wane
34. Memo forward (abbr.)
35. DNA amplification technique (initialism)
36. Salary
37. Prof. degree
38. Freelance employer
39. Dissemination options
42. Type of reviewer
43. Physicians' org.
44. "Time" preceder
46. Employed
50. Address abbr.
51. "e-" follower
52. It wakes a wave
53. Paycheck ID
54. Pulm. disease
55. Lang.

## DOWN

1. A herpes virus (abbr.)
2. Sheltered side
3. Blood coag. measure
4. Print or post
5. PET and CAT
6. Team members
7. Dental org.
8. Go over again
9. Helper
10. Auricular
11. Milk, prefix
19. Shock treatment (abbr.)
21. Lawyer
22. Gut procedure initialism
23. A demonstrative
24. Parasite's abode
25. Plot of sens. and spec.
27. Drug ref.
28. Folio
29. Nirvana
30. CME finale
32. Light sensor (abbr.)
33. Copyright clause
35. "Big" industry
36. Surg. procedure
37. Major author/researcher (abbr.)
38. eg, prokaryotic, eukaryotic
39. "Big" media
40. Emerg. workers
41. Sew or drat
42. Compensated
45. Language facility
47. Not plu.
48. A hard science (abbr.)
49. Eliminate (abbr.)

► Solution on page 132.