A Guide to English Language Usage for non-native speakers

Peter Harvey

Illustrations by Alison Litherland
accents and diacritic marks.

English words do not have these, although they are sometimes written on foreign words used in English such as fiancée. When a word is accepted as an English one the accent is gradually dropped. Their names in English are ’acute, `grave /graʊv/, ^circumflex, „cedilla, “tilde, “umlaut (German) or diaeresis /daiˈerɪsɪs/ (other languages). The names of letters with these symbols are spoken as é e-acute, à a-grave, ï i-circumflex etc. Spanish-speakers should note that in English the word tilde refers only to the ~, the mark which distinguishes ñ from n. English keyboards do not have these accents and marks. The best rule seems to be to use the accent or mark whenever possible if it makes a difference to pronunciation: façade, cliché, Müller, Muñoz, though some publishers ignore them almost completely or are inconsistent in their use of them in foreign names, possibly for fear of misunderstanding the complications of the large number of accents and marks in some central European languages. Publishers vary considerably in their treatment of such marks on foreign words.

adjectives without nouns

An ATTRIBUTIVE *ADJECTIVE must be followed by a noun or pronoun; it cannot be left hanging in the air. If there is no obvious pronoun, use one: Which do you prefer? The green one or the red one/this one or that one? or THING: The most difficult thing will be…; The most exciting thing about the holidays was… See ONE REPRESENTING A NOUN.

exceptions to this rule

Certain adjectives which are used to define groups of people in society; in these cases the adjective takes a plural verb: the rich have all the pleasure; the poor have all the problems; the healthy; the sick, the unemployed.

Certain nationality adjectives: the French; the Irish. See COUNTRIES AND NATIONALITIES for the nationality adjectives that can be used in this way.

Adjectives used in abstract contexts: A journey into the unknown; The best is the enemy of the good. Ordinal numbers, superlatives, last, next, other and own. These can be used without a following noun: the second (one): ALL is for the best in the best of all possible worlds; the other (one); No thanks, I prefer my own.

Some fixed expressions with prepositions: for your own good; for good (= forever, permanently); in public, in private, in secret; in the nude, in the wild; in short; to the full; from bad to worse; out of the ordinary; in the extreme; above normal; in common.

Adjectives used without nouns cannot take a POSSESSIVE: John was the last to arrive; The last person’s (not The last’s) arrival time.

dynamic and stative

Dynamic verbs describe an action: do, sit, walk, work, write. They have a CONTINUOUS ASPECT, which describes a current action or state: I was sitting on the wall and an imperative, which orders an action: Sit there. Get as a PASSIVE AUXILIARY is dynamic.

Stative verbs are not used in the continuous and imperative forms since the state that they describe is always valid (but see FUTURE CONTINUOUS (*FUTURE)): I’m doubting/knowing that are impossible.

ellipsis

This is the omission of certain words which can be clearly understood from the context. For example, Thank you is an elliptical form of I/we thank you. In I didn’t tell him yesterday but I will (tell him) tomorrow the second tell him is usually ellipted (i.e. omitted).

Ellipsis is the term for the three dots (…) that indicate an omission in a quotation.
eponyms
An eponym is the use of the inventor of a thing as its name. A sandwich is named after the fourth Earl of Sandwich (1718-1792) who ate meat between slices of bread while he was gambling so that he would not have to leave the table; Wellington boots are boots in a style made famous by the Duke of Wellington (1769-1852) but now they are always waterproof rubber boots, usually black or green and known as wellies. The Bodleian Library (in Oxford), the cardigan, the diesel engine, the mackintosh (waterproof coat), the Morse code and sadism, are also examples of eponyms, from Sir Thomas Bodley, the Earl of Cardigan, Rudolf Diesel, Charles Macintosh, Samuel Morse, and the Marquis de Sade respectively.

In literature an eponymous hero is one whose name is also the title of the work: Jane Eyre is the eponymous HEROINE of the book by Charlotte Brontë.

a place where metal or glass is melted and moulded into shape.

fingers & toes
Moving away from the thumb, there are the first or index finger, the second or middle finger, the third or ring finger, and the fourth or little finger (pinky in American English). The word finger is only used in relation to the hands; the parts of the feet that correspond to fingers are called toes. BIG and LITTLE toes have special names; the other toes do not.

get
(Get, got, got in British English; in American English the past participle gotten is common. This is found in British English in the compounds beget and forget, -got, -gotten.)

This word has a large number of meanings, many of which are phrasal verbs, but they can generally be placed in three groups. Because of the number and range of words that it can replace it is common in informal and colloquial use, but it is usually avoided by careful writers because its use suggests a lack of care and thought in choice of language.

(... article continues, 321 words )

hit etc.
This article contains sub-articles on the two main words hit and strike followed by the following in alphabetical order: bang, bash, batter, beat, belt, bump, butt, dash, flog, kick, knock, pound, punch, slap, smack, thrash, thump.

hit, hit, hit
Hit is the most general of these words. It is transitive except when compounded with certain adverbs such as hit back and hit out. You can hit somebody or something with a part of your body (hand, head), with a hand-held instrument (hammer, stick) or with something that is thrown or projected (ball, bullet). One thing can hit another: The apple hit the roof as it fell from the tree; I hit my head on a low door frame. You can be hit by something that comes forcefully to your mind: The importance/seriousness/difficulty/danger etc. of the situation only hit me later. Hit can mean affect badly: He was hit hard by the financial recession; The country was hit by an earthquake.

The usual noun for the act of hitting something is blow. The usual verbs are deal and strike: That dealt a blow to my hopes; Strike a blow for freedom. It can mean a sudden problem: His resignation
A Guide to English Language Usage for non-native speakers, Peter Harvey, Lavengro Books

is a serious blow for the company. Hit can be used as a noun but is usually limited to these three meanings:

A success: That pudding was a hit with the children.
The number of people visiting a website: Our site had 10,000 hits last month, or something found by an internet search engine: The search gave me 13,974 hits.

( … hit, strike, bash, batter, beat, belt, bump, butt, dash, flog, kick, knock, pound … )

punch
This means to hit with a closed fist; it can be used as a noun (throw a punch). It also means to make a hole in paper, metal, leather etc. and is the name of the tool used for doing so. You can punch a piece of metal or punch a hole in a piece of metal.

slap
This means to hit with an open hand. To slap someone’s face expresses anger, but to slap someone on the back is an expression of congratulations. Children are sometimes punished by being slapped on the legs or hands. A slap on the wrist is often used figuratively for a punishment or criticism. Slap and tickle is light-hearted amorous play, kissing and cuddling, snogging (slang).

( … smack, thrash, thump )

Keats and Yeats
The surname of the English Romantic poet John Keats (1795-1821) is pronounced /kiːts/. The surname of the Irish Nationalist poet William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) is pronounced /jɛɪts/.

make love
At one time make love meant to approach someone with the intention of establishing a loving relationship or to flirt. In the twentieth century it came to mean precisely to have sexual relations with someone. It is important to bear this in mind when reading books written before the middle of that century.

modal auxiliary verbs
This article has an introduction followed by sections dealing with ability, permission, and possibility; these together cover the verbs can, be able, may, and might. There are sections dealing separately with the verbs must, ought to & should, shall & should, and will & would followed by sections covering the use of modal verbs with the PERFECT ASPECT (She might have come) and with the CONTINUOUS ASPECT (He may be coming). The final section deals with semi-modal verbs (dare and need).

introduction
Like other Germanic languages English has modal verbs that modify other verbs with relation to willingness, possibility, obligation, and other moods. They are also used to indicate some future and conditional forms.
It is very important indeed to understand that with the exception of *could*, which is the past of *can*, the use of the word *past* with respect to modal verbs has no connection at all with chronological time. Those words are used when a past form of the verb is required for reasons of syntax. See INDIRECT SPEECH; TENSE & TIME.

**Could** is also the conditional of *can*.

Modal verbs have four things in common that distinguish them from other verbs:

- They have no *s* in the third person singular: *he can, it must*.
- They are followed by a bare infinitive (without *to*): *You may go, It will rain*.
- They make question and negative forms without *do/does/did* as auxiliary verbs: *May I go? She must not go*.
- They are defective, i.e. they do not have all tense forms, and they have no infinitive forms. When necessary, this deficiency is made up by using other verb forms.

Modal verbs are used to indicate such ideas as possibility, ability etc.:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ability</th>
<th>can/could</th>
<th>obligation, compulsion</th>
<th>must; have got to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>possibility</td>
<td>can/could</td>
<td>obligation (suggestion)</td>
<td>should, ought to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>permission</td>
<td>can/could</td>
<td>Prediction</td>
<td>should, ought to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>logical necessity</td>
<td>must; have got to</td>
<td>volition, willingness</td>
<td>will, would, shall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>logical impossibility</td>
<td>cannot</td>
<td></td>
<td>will, would</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The dividing lines between these categories are not always clear.

**musical instruments**

The usual instruments of a symphony orchestra are:

**Strings:** violin, viola /ˈvɪləʊ/, cello /ˈkɛloʊ/, double bass /ˈbeɪs/.
**Woodwind:** clarinet, oboe, cor anglais /ˈkɔr ənˈglɛɪʃ/, bassoon, flute, piccolo
**Brass:** trumpet, cornet, trombone, tuba, French horn.
**Percussion:** drums, kettle drums (timpani), cymbals, triangle.

An orchestra is *conducted* by a **CONDUCTOR** (not director), who uses a *baton*. The *leader* of the orchestra is the principal violinist. See MUSICAL NOTATION AND TERMINOLOGY.

**musical notation and terminology**

In musical notation in Britain the letters are the constant, absolute names of the notes while the *sol-fa* /ˈsɒlfə/ names are relative. Below are three scales showing this system.

**scale of C major**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>letter name</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>sol-fa name</strong></td>
<td>do</td>
<td>re</td>
<td>mi</td>
<td>fa</td>
<td>sol</td>
<td>la</td>
<td>ti</td>
<td>do</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this scale of C major, the lower C is on a *ledger* /ˈlɛdər/ line. This is **MIDDLE C**.

(***article continues, 3,648 words … **)

(***article continues, 300 words and two scales… **)
nouns
(220 words)
gender, case, and plural forms
English nouns do not have GENDER as such although the PRONOUNS he, him, his, she, her, it and its vary with the sex of the referent. With the exception of the possessive they have no indications of CASE, and with very few exceptions English nouns make their PLURAL FORMS with (e)s.

(numbers)
(214 words)
numbers in writing
When numbers are written by hand in English, one /wan/ is a single vertical stroke (l), though it is often printed (1 or 1); seven has no cross (7). This can be confusing for people from countries where these numbers are written by hand as 1 and 7.

Odd
(380 words)
odd for proportion and chance
Odds is the term used to describe proportional chances, especially in betting: I’ll give you odds of 5-1 (spoken as five to one) against that horse winning the race. This means that if the horse loses, you will give me a certain sum of money (e.g. £100), and if it wins I will give you five times that sum (£500).

Offspring
This refers to children and adults in the sense that they are produced by their parents; it is a synonym of descendant and is the term used in genetics. It does not mean child in any other sense; it is incorrect to say How many offspring do you have? or Stop behaving like an offspring. It does not change in the plural offsprings.

opposite & in front of
(58 words)
Arthur and Helen are sitting opposite EACH OTHER at this table. However, Arthur’s papers are on the table in front of him because their position is described in relation to the front part of his body.
palace
In Britain a palace is an official residence of the royal family or of a bishop; the Palace of Westminster, the building in which Parliament meets, is a royal palace. The word is not usually used for a private residence, however grand it is; the exceptions are Blenheim Palace, the residence of the Duke of Marlborough, and Dalkeith Palace near Edinburgh, which is now used by the University of Wisconsin. The very ornate pubs of Victorian times were ironically called gin palaces.

participle clauses
A participle clause is one in which the present participle (-ING FORM) or past participle is used alone; it can be considered as a reduction of a continuous verb when it contains a present participle. The sentence While/When/As I was cycling along the street, I saw a dog can be rewritten as While/When cycling along the street, I saw a dog (NB not As cycling along the street, I saw a dog.) or simply Cycling along the street, I saw a dog.
It is wrong to say Cycling along the street, the dog ran away from me because this suggests (grammatically, though illogically) that the dog was cycling.

perfect aspect
For comparison and contrast of past simple and present perfect see PAST SIMPLE & PRESENT PERFECT. For further details about the future perfect see FUTURE.
There are three perfect forms: present, past, and future. They are formed with the appropriate tense of the verb have and the past participle.

present perfect
This is used:
• for states (stative verbs) that began in the past, continue in the present, and will probably continue in the future: I have lived here for over 20 years; He’s always supported that team; She’s never owned a car.

q, Q /kju; /
The seventeenth letter of the alphabet. In English words it is found in the combination qu, which is pronounced /kw/: quick, equal.
In words of French origin that end with -que it has the French pronunciation /k/: Basque, bisque, boutique, brusque, calque, cheque, grotesque, mosque, mystique, oblique, picturesque, unique among others, and also in the words chequer /'tʃekə/, marquee /ˈmɑːkwiː/, quay /kiː/, and queue /kuː/.
In some words that have been transliterated from Arabic it is written without the u that always follows it in English: Iraqi(i), Qatar, al Qaeda. In such cases it is usually pronounced /k/ in English, though the sound that the Arabic letter represents is not found in English and is pronounced rather differently in that language.

tag questions
form
Like other languages, English has a way of adding words to a statement to make a question and invite the hearer to respond. The way in which this is done is more complex in English than in other languages, involving both verb structure and intonation.
The structure of tag questions is simple enough to describe and understand, but their use requires a fluency in language management that learners find considerable difficulty in acquiring. A tag question takes the auxiliary verb from the main clause and turns it into a question using the auxiliary verb and a pronoun. An affirmative sentence has a negative tag question and vice versa.
John has lived in Paris, hasn’t he?
Mary hasn’t lived in Moscow, has she?
Your brother will be there, won’t he?
She can swim, can’t she?
The school is open now, isn’t it?
The hospital isn’t far away, is it?
He likes ice cream, doesn’t he?
She doesn’t eat liver, does she?
I’m right, aren’t I?
I’m not right, am I?

Wales, a brief history

The Norman invasion of England extended into Wales, with the building of castles to maintain Norman power in the land they had conquered. With time, these new Norman landowners became accepted by the Welsh people and alliances and marriages became more frequent. Resistance to Norman occupation continued however. Llewelyn Olaf (Llewelyn the Last; for pronunciation of Welsh ll see L, L) was recognised by England as Prince of Wales, but in 1282 Edward I declared him a rebel and defeated and killed him in battle. In 1284 all Welshmen were declared subjects of the English Crown; many more castles were built to maintain the occupation. These castles and fortified towns established the pattern, which can be found even today, that Welsh language and culture survive in rural areas while the commercial towns are more English in character. In 1404 Owain Glyndwr had united the Welsh people under his leadership and he drove the English out of much of Wales. He planned to establish a Welsh nation with a university. But he failed; his capital Harlech fell in 1409 and he became a fugitive. There is no record of his death. Welsh customs and laws were abolished by the English and in 1536 Henry VIII of England (whose own family, the Tudors, were Welsh in origin) signed an Act of Union making Wales entirely subject to English law. This incorporated Wales into England more comprehensively than the Act of Union with Scotland.

( ... article continues, 146 words ... )
INDEX

This index lists incidental references. A word listed here with a reference to another entry may have its own full entry as well. For example, pepper is referenced here to corn but it also has its own article under its own name. This index does not contain any cross-references to these articles: abbreviations; American English; anger, surprise and insults, (with other taboo words); countries and nationalities; irregular verbs; personal names; prepositions; proverbs.

A
abdomen .................. belly
ability ..................... modal auxiliary verbs
abreast ................... breast
accent ..................... stress differences
accustomed ............. used to, would & accustomed to
acre ..................... weights and measures
actual(ly) .............. false friends
addict .................... stress differences
adopt ..................... adapt
advertise ............... -ise & -ize
advise ................. -ise & -ize
afraid ...................... adjective
aft ......................... ship
again(st) ............... amid(st)
agenda .................... plural

agent ...................... passive voice
airplane .................. aeroplane
all right ................ already
always .................... ever & always
altogether .............. already
among(st) ............. amid(st)
Anglican .............. catholic; Church of England; clerk;
dog-collar
antenna .................. aerial
Anthony .................. notes for personal names
antique ................. ancient
antonym ................ synonym
anxiety ............... -iety
apostrophe ........... punctuation
apprise .................. -ise & -ize

( ... article continues, 796 items)
Also by Peter Harvey

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made by Spanish-speakers
(with a few Catalan specials)

An easy-to-read and user-friendly book … grammar receives careful attention … may benefit both intermediate and advanced students of English … Teachers of English may also find it useful.

TESOL Spain Newsletter

While [this book] is clearly aimed at the Spanish-speaking learner of English it is also valuable for the teacher of English working in a Spanish-speaking environment … [it highlights] many of the false friends which exist … Translations show the learner what words do, and, equally importantly, do not mean … with a wealth of real-life examples which are sometimes humorous, the book is very readable … There is certainly a gap in the market for such a book … of all the many English language books I have on my bookshelf, this is the only one that has a long waiting list of Spanish-speaking friends wanting to borrow it.

Modern English Teacher

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As the name suggests, Lavengro Books Pearls are concentrated units of concise information averaging about 75 words each, intended for people learning English.

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