

8-2013

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CU Commons Citation

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff, Back to Basics II: Parts of Speech, *Advocate*, Aug. 2013, at 68.

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Back to Basics II: Parts of Speech

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

I frequently include tidbits of grammar to help my readers understand the more nuanced advice I'm discussing in a particular column. But many readers have let me know that they would like an easy guide to the various parts of a sentence. I think that's a great request. It's much easier to write and edit if you understand how the words on a page create a sentence.

In English, we classify words into eight parts of speech: noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, and interjection. These classifications are based on how a word functions within a sentence, not necessarily on the word itself. Think about the last time you looked up a word in a dictionary—remember how a single word could be both a noun and an adverb, for instance. Grammar really is, after all, functional in operation.

When a word trips you up as you write or edit a sentence, you just might have a problem with its usage as that part of speech. So, we will look briefly at each of the eight parts of speech to help you understand how the words on your page are functioning.



Nouns

We probably all remember this from grade school — a noun is a word indicating a person, place, or thing. Nouns come with their own set of classifications: nominative, objective, or possessive. Nouns can be proper or common, concrete or abstract, singular or plural. Nouns can also be collective.

Nouns need to agree in number with the rest of the sentence.



Both lawyers filed their briefs early.

Each lawyer filed her brief at the last minute.

Nouns also tend to trip us up when we are using a collective noun. We need to make sure to use a singular pronoun or verb to go with that noun.

The jury was deadlocked. Its members couldn't agree on liability.

The board is meeting.

Pronouns

A pronoun is a word used in place of a noun (the noun replaced is then called the antecedent). Although most pronouns function as substitutes for nouns, some can act as adjectives by modifying a noun. Pronouns are classified according to their usage: personal, possessive, reflexive-intensive, demonstrative, interrogative, relative, indefinite, and reciprocal.

Pronouns create a host of problems. Indeed, pronoun usage is so complex, I've written three different columns dedicated to pronouns and haven't yet covered everything.¹ But, I'll highlight the basics here. Pro-

nouns must agree in number, gender, and person with its antecedent, and they must unambiguously refer to the correct antecedent.

Verbs

Verbs are the words that express action in a sentence, and can be composed of both a main verb and a helping verb. The main verb of a sentence will always change form when it's put into a different tense.

Usually, I use Westlaw.

Yesterday, I used LexisNexis.

I am using Casemaker now.

The last example had a helping verb: am. English has 23 helping verbs. *Have, do, and be* can also function as main verbs. Their various forms make up most of the list of helping verbs: *have, has, had, do, does, did, be, am, is, are, was, were, being, and been*. The remaining helping verbs don't change form and are called modals: *can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, and would*. *Ought to* is sometimes classified as a modal, too.

And, verbs can be followed by words that look like prepositions,

but are so closely associated with the verb that they make up part of its meaning. In fact, *make up* in the last sentence illustrates this point.

Adjectives (and articles)

An adjective is a word used to modify or describe a noun or pronoun. Adjectives usually tell the reader which one, what kind of, or how many.

The younger man broke the window of the pawnshop. (Which man?)

The defendant stole rare valuable old coins. (What kind of coins?)

Eleven jurors agreed on the defendant's guilt. (How many jurors?)

Most adjectives come before the noun they modify, but adjectives can also follow linking verbs.

Good medicine always tastes bitter.

Justice is blind.

These adjectives describe the subject of the sentence, even though they might be far away in sentence placement. (Bitter describes medicine; blind describes justice.)

Finally, articles are sometimes classified as adjectives and are used to mark nouns. English has three articles: *the*, *a*, and *an*. When referring to a specific noun, use the definite article *the*, otherwise use *a* or *an*.

Adverbs

Adverbs are words that modify a verb or verbal, an adjective, or another adverb. When adverbs modify a verb, they tell the reader when, where, how, why, under what conditions, or to what degree.

We must move quickly. (Move how?)

Read the best briefs first. (Read when?)

When adverbs modify adjectives or other adverbs, they tend to intensify or limit the intensity of the word they modify.

Be extremely nerdy about grammar, and you will be very lonely.

Finally, negators (*not*, *never*) are classified as adverbs.

Prepositions

A preposition is a word or words placed before a noun or pronoun to form a phrase that modifies another word in the sentence. Almost always this prepositional phrase functions as an adjective or an adverb.

English has a limited number of prepositions. Prepositions tend to create little to no trouble for native English speakers. There are, however, a few accepted idiomatic expressions that break the rule.

Minors are treated different from adults in the criminal justice system. (not different than)

Be sure to check a good dictionary for usage advice. (not sure and)

Conjunctions

Conjunctions join words, phrases, or clauses and indicate the relationship between the elements they join. Understanding the various types of conjunctions can help punctuate sentences correctly and can even help us write complete sentences.

Coordinating conjunctions connect grammatically equal elements. These seven conjunctions — *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, *so* — can be used to join two independent clauses. Be careful, however, to put a comma before the coordinating conjunction if it is used this way.

The negotiation worked, and the case settled.

Correlative conjunctions come in pairs, and they, too, join grammatically equal elements.

Both fraud and constitutional violations must be pled with specificity.

Subordinating conjunctions introduce subordinate clauses and indicate their relationship to the rest of the sentence: *after*, *although*, *as*, *as if*, *because*, *before*, *even though*, *if*, *in*

order that, *rather than*, *since*, *so that*, *than*, *that*, *though*, *unless*, *until*, *when*, *where*, *whether*, *while*.

Recognizing these conjunctions will help you recognize when you have created a sentence fragment.

After the jury selection.

Conjunctive adverbs are adverbs used to indicate the relationship between independent clauses. *Accordingly*, *consequently*, *furthermore*, *instead*, *moreover*, *still*, *therefore*, and *thus* are a few of the more common conjunctive adverbs. Be careful when using these types of adverbs to join two independent clauses. They take a semicolon instead of a comma.

The negotiation didn't work; instead the case went to trial.

Interjections

Interjections are words used to express emotions, most commonly surprise. We rarely use interjections in legal writing, but if you do choose to use one, use an exclamation point. *Wow! That was a lot of grammar for one day.*

Sources

- Diana Hacker, *A Writer's Reference*, 337-344 (3d ed. 1995)
- Bryan A. Garner, *The Redbook: A Manual on Legal Style*, §10 (2d ed. 2006).
- Bryan A. Garner, *Garner's Dictionary of Legal Usage*, 276 (3d ed. 2011).

Endnotes

1. Problems with Pronouns Part III: Gender-Linked Pronouns, *The Advocate* (June/July 2013); Problems with Pronouns Part II: Personal, Reflexive, and Possessive Pronouns, *The Advocate* (June/July 2012); Problems with Pronouns: Part I, *The Advocate* (March/April 2012)

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