

GOLDEN GRAMMAR RULES

By Michael Swan

1. Don't use *an* with *own*.

Sue needs **her own** room. (NOT ~~Sue needs an own room.~~)
I'd like **a** phone line **of my own**. (NOT ... ~~an own phone line.~~)

2. Use *or rather* to correct yourself.

She's German - **or rather**, Austrian. (NOT ~~She's German or better, Austrian.~~)
I'll see you on Friday - **or rather**, Saturday.

3. Use the simple present - *play(s)*, *rain(s)* etc - to talk about habits and repeated actions.

I **play** tennis every Saturday. (NOT ~~I am playing tennis every Saturday.~~)
It usually **rains** a lot in November.

4. Use *will ...*, not the present, for offers and promises.

I **ll cook** you supper this evening. (NOT ~~I cook you supper this evening.~~)
I promise I **ll phone** you tomorrow. (NOT ~~I promise I phone you tomorrow.~~)

5. Don't drop prepositions with passive verbs.

I don't like to be shouted **at**. (NOT ~~I don't like to be shouted.~~)
This needs to be thought **about** some more. (NOT ~~This needs to be thought some more.~~)

6. Don't use a present tense after *It's time*.

It's time you **went** home. (NOT ~~It's time you go home.~~)
It's time we **invited** Bill and Sonia. (NOT ~~It's time we invite Bill and Sonia.~~)

7. Use *was/were born* to give dates of birth.

I **was born** in 1975. (NOT ~~I am born in 1975.~~)
Shakespeare **was born** in 1564.

8. *Police* is a plural noun.

The police **are** looking for him. (NOT ~~The police is looking for him.~~)
I called the police, but **they were** too busy to come.

9. Don't use *the* to talk about things in general.

Books are expensive. (NOT ~~The books are expensive.~~)
I love **music**. (NOT ~~I love the music.~~)

10. Use *had better*, not *have better*.

I think you **d better** see the doctor. (NOT ~~I think you have better see the doctor.~~)
We **d better** ask John to help us.

11. Use the present progressive - *am playing, is raining* etc - to talk about things that are continuing at the time of speaking.

I'm **playing** very badly today. (NOT I play very badly today.)
Look! It's **raining**! (NOT Look! It rains!)

12. Use *for* with a period of time. Use *since* with the beginning of the period.

for the last two hours = since 9 o'clock

for three days = since Monday

for five years = since I left school

I've been learning English **for** five years. (NOT I've been learning English since three years.)

We've been waiting **for** ages, since eight o'clock.

13. Don't separate the verb from the object.

VERB OBJECT

She **speaks English** very well. (NOT She speaks very well English.)

Andy **likes skiing** very much. (NOT Andy likes very much skiing.)

14. Don't use the present perfect - *have/has seen, have/has gone* etc - with words that name a finished time.

I **saw** him **yesterday**. (NOT I have seen him yesterday.)

They **went** to Greece **last summer**. (NOT They have gone ... last summer.)

15. English (the language) normally has no article.

You speak **very good English**. (NOT You speak a very good English.)

16. After *look forward to*, we use *-ing*, not an infinitive.

I look forward to **seeing** you. (NOT I look forward to see you.)

We're looking forward to **going** on holiday. (NOT ... to go on holiday.)

17. *Information* is an uncountable noun.

Can you give me **some** information? (NOT Can you give me an information?)

I got a lot of **information** from the Internet. (NOT I got a lot of informations from the Internet.)

18. Use *-ing* forms after prepositions.

I drove there without **stopping**. (NOT I drove there without to stop.)

Wash your hands before **eating**. (NOT Wash your hands before to eat.)

19. Use *this*, not *that*, for things that are close.

Come here and look at **this** paper. (NOT Come here and look at that paper.)

How long have you been in **this** country? (NOT How long have you been in that country?)

20. Use a plural noun after *one and a half*.

We waited one and a half **hours**. (NOT We waited one and a half hour.)

A mile is about one and a half **kilometres**. (NOT A mile is about one and a half kilometre.)

21. Use the present perfect, not the present, to say how long things have been going on.

I've **been waiting** since 10 o'clock. (NOT I'm waiting since 10 o'clock.)

We've **lived** here for nine years. (NOT We live here for nine years.)

22. *The majority* is normally plural.

Some people are interested, but the majority **don't care**. (NOT ... but the majority doesn't care.)
The majority of these people **are** very poor. (NOT The majority of these people is very poor.)

23. Use *too much/many* before (adjective +) noun; use *too* before an adjective with no noun.

There's **too much** noise.
I bought **too much** red paint.
Those shoes are **too expensive**. (NOT Those shoes are too much expensive.)

24. Use *that*, not *what*, after *all*.

I've told you **all that** I know. (NOT I've told you all what I know.)
He gave her **all that** he had.

25. Don't say *according to me* to give your opinion.

I think it's a good film. (NOT According to me, it's a good film.)
In my opinion, you're making a serious mistake. (NOT According to me, you're making a serious mistake.)

26. Don't ask about possibilities with *May you ...?* etc.

Do you think you'll go camping this summer? (NOT May you go camping this summer?)
Is Joan likely to be here tomorrow? (NOT May Joan be here tomorrow?)

27. Use *who*, not *which*, for people in relative structures.

The woman **who** lives upstairs is from Thailand. (NOT The woman which lives upstairs is from Thailand.)
I don't like people **who** shout all the time. (NOT I don't like people which shout all the time.)

28. Use *for*, not *during*, to say 'how long'.

We waited **for** six hours. (NOT We waited during six hours.)
He was ill **for** three weeks. (NOT He was ill during three weeks.)

29. Use *to ...*, not *for ...*, to say why you do something.

I came here **to** study English. (NOT I came here for study English.)
She telephoned me **to** explain the problem. (NOT She telephoned me for explain the problem.)

30. Use reflexives (*myself* etc) when the object is the same as the subject.

I looked at **myself** in the mirror. (NOT I looked at me in the mirror.)
Why are you talking to **yourself**? (NOT Why are you talking to you?)

31. Use a present tense to talk about the future after *when*, *until*, *as soon as*, *after*, *before* etc.

I'll phone you when I **arrive**. (NOT I'll phone you when I will arrive.)
Let's wait until it **gets** dark. (NOT Let's wait until it will get dark.)
We'll start as soon as Mary **arrives**. (NOT We'll start as soon as Mary will arrive.)

32. Before most abstract nouns, we use *great*, not *big*.

I have **great** respect for her ideas. (NOT I have big respect for her ideas.)
We had **great** difficulty in understanding him. (NOT We had big difficulty in understanding him.)

33. Don't use *the* with a superlative when you are not comparing one person or thing with another.

Compare:

- She's **the nicest** of the three teachers.
- She's **nicest** when she's working with small children.

- This is **the best** wine I've got.
- This wine is **best** when it's three or four years old.

34. Put *enough* after, not before, adjectives.

This soup isn't hot **enough**. (NOT ~~This soup isn't enough hot.~~)
She's old **enough** to walk to school by herself.

35. Don't use a structure with *that ...* after *want* or *would like*.

My parents want **me to go** to university. (NOT ~~My parents want that I go to university.~~)
I'd like **everybody to leave**. (NOT ~~I'd like that everybody leaves.~~)

36. After link verbs like *be*, *seem*, *feel*, *look*, *smell*, *sound*, *taste*, we use adjectives, not adverbs.

I feel **happy** today. (NOT ~~I feel happily today.~~)
This soup tastes **strange**. (NOT ~~This soup tastes strangely.~~)

37. Use *than* after comparatives.

My mother is three years older **than** my father. (NOT ~~My mother is three years older than/as my father.~~)
Petrol is more expensive **than** diesel.

38. In questions, put the subject immediately after the auxiliary verb.

Where **are the President and his family** staying? (NOT ~~Where are staying the President and his family?~~)
Have all the guests arrived? (NOT ~~Have arrived all the guests?~~)

39. *Used to* has no present.

I **play** tennis at weekends. (NOT ~~I use to play tennis at weekends.~~)
Where **do** you usually **have** lunch? (NOT ~~Where do you use to have lunch?~~)

40. Use *through*, not *along*, for periods of time.

All **through** the centuries, there have been wars. (NOT ~~All along the centuries, there have been wars.~~)

41. Use *can't*, not *mustn't*, to say that something is logically impossible.

It **can't** be the postman at the door. It's only 7 o'clock. (NOT ~~It mustn't be the postman at the door. It's only 7 o'clock.~~)
If A is bigger than B, and B is bigger than C, then C **can't** be bigger than A. (NOT ~~... then C mustn't be bigger than A.~~)

42. Use the present perfect with *This is the first time ...* etc.

This is the first time I **ve been** here. (NOT ~~This is the first time I'm here.~~)
This is the fifth cup of coffee I **ve drunk** today. (NOT ~~This is the fifth cup of coffee I drink today.~~)

43. Use *be*, not *have*, to give people's ages.

My sister **is** 15 (years old). (NOT ~~My sister has 15 years.~~)

44. Use *between*, not *among*, to talk about position in relation to several clearly separate people or things.

Switzerland is **between** France, Austria, Germany and Italy. (NOT ~~Switzerland is among France, Austria, Germany and Italy.~~)
The bottle rolled **between** the wheels of the car.

45. We don't normally use *the* before abbreviations that are pronounced like words ('acronyms').

My cousin works for **NATO**. (NOT ~~My cousin works for the NATO.~~)
The money was given by **UNESCO**. (NOT ~~... by the UNESCO.~~)

46. *Everybody* is a singular word.

Everybody **was** late. (NOT ~~Everybody were late.~~)
Is everybody ready? (NOT ~~Are everybody ready?~~)

47. Use *any*, not *some*, in negative sentences.

She hasn't got **any** money. (NOT ~~She hasn't got some money.~~)
I didn't see **anybody**. (NOT ~~I didn't see somebody.~~)

48. Use *interested* for feelings; use *interesting* for the things that interest people. The same goes for *bored/boring*, *excited/exciting* etc.

I'm **interested** in history. (NOT ~~I'm interesting in history.~~)
History is **interesting**.
I'm **bored** in the maths lessons. (NOT ~~I'm boring in the maths lessons.~~)
I think maths is **boring**.

49. Use *by*, not *until/till*, to mean 'not later than'.

Can you mend this **by** Tuesday? (NOT ~~Can you mend this until Tuesday?~~)
I'll finish the book **by** tonight. (NOT ~~I'll finish the book till tonight.~~)

50. Use *like*, not *as*, to give examples.

I prefer warm countries, **like** Spain. (NOT ~~I prefer warm countries, as Spain.~~)
I eat a lot of meat, **like** beef or lamb.

51. Use *whether*, not *if*, after prepositions.

We talked about whether it was ready. (NOT ~~We talked about if it was ready.~~)
It's a question of whether we have enough time. (NOT ~~It's a question of if we have enough time.~~)

52. Use the present progressive passive, not the simple present passive, to talk about things that are going on just around now.

Our flat is being decorated this week. (NOT ~~Our flat is decorated this week.~~)
Your bill is just being prepared, sir. (NOT ~~Your bill is just prepared, sir.~~)

53. We don't normally use *must* to talk about the past.

I had to see the dentist yesterday. (NOT ~~I must see the dentist yesterday.~~)
When I left school, young men had to do military service. (NOT ~~When I left school, young men must do military service.~~)

54. When you put two nouns together, be careful to get the right order.

I like eating milk chocolate. (NOT ~~I like eating chocolate milk.~~)
What's your phone number? (NOT ~~What's your number phone?~~)

55. Use the *whole of*, not *whole*, before the name of a place.

The whole of Paris was celebrating. (NOT ~~Whole Paris was celebrating.~~)
He knows the whole of South America very well. (NOT ~~He knows whole South America very well.~~)

56. We don't normally use progressive forms of *believe*.

I don't believe him. (NOT ~~I'm not believing him.~~)

Do you believe what she says? (NOT ~~Are you believing what she says?~~)

57. Don't use *in front of* to mean 'facing' or 'opposite'.

She sat down facing me and looked into my eyes. (NOT ~~She sat down in front of me and looked into my eyes.~~)

There's a hotel opposite our house. (NOT ~~There's a hotel in front of our house.~~)

58. Use *it*, not *I*, *he*, *she* etc to identify people.

(on the phone): Hello. It's Alan Williams speaking. ((NOT ~~Hello. I'm Alan Williams.~~)

'Who's that?' 'It's John.' (NOT ~~Who's that? 'He's John.'~~)

59. *People* (meaning 'persons') is a plural word.

The people in this town are very friendly. (NOT ~~The people in this town is very friendly.~~)

Who are those people? (NOT ~~Who is that people?~~)

60. Use *although* or *but*, but not both together.

Although it was late, she went out.

It was late, but she went out.

(BUT NOT ~~Although it was late, but she went out.~~)

61. With *if*, we normally use the present to talk about the future.

If I **have** time, I'll phone you. (NOT ~~If I'll have time, I'll phone you.~~)

I'll be surprised if she **answers** my letter. (NOT ~~I'll be surprised if she'll answer my letter.~~)

62. Use *almost*, not *nearly*, to say that one thing is very like another.

She is **almost** a sister to me. (NOT ~~She is nearly a sister to me.~~)

I **almost** wish I had stayed at home. (NOT ~~I nearly wish I had stayed at home.~~)

63. If you don't do something any more, you *stop doing* it.

The doctor told me to **stop smoking**. (NOT ~~The doctor told me to stop to smoke.~~)

I'm going to **stop working** so hard. (NOT ~~I'm going to stop to work so hard.~~)

64. A singular countable noun must normally have a determiner (e.g. *a/an, the, my, that*).

She broke **a/the/that/my** window. (NOT ~~She broke window.~~)

Where is **the** station? (NOT ~~Where is station?~~)

65. We don't often use *would* in subordinate clauses; instead, we use past tenses.

Would you follow me wherever I **went**? (NOT ~~Would you follow me wherever I would go?~~)

I would tell you if I **knew**. (NOT ~~I would tell you if I would know.~~)

66. With *when*, use the past perfect to make it clear that one thing finished before another started.

When I **had written** my letters, I did some gardening. (NOT ~~When I wrote my letters, I did some gardening.~~)

When he **had cleaned** the windows, he stopped for a cup of tea. (NOT ~~When he cleaned the windows, he stopped for a cup of tea.~~)

67. Don't use *can* to talk about the chance that something will happen.

It **may/might/could** rain this evening. (NOT ~~It can rain this evening.~~)
I think Jane **may/might/could** come tomorrow. (NOT ~~I think Jane can come tomorrow.~~)

68. Don't use an infinitive after *think*.

I'm thinking **of changing** my job. (NOT ~~I'm thinking to change my job.~~)
Are you thinking **of going** home this weekend? (NOT ~~Are you thinking to go home this weekend?~~)

69. Use a singular noun after *every*.

I play tennis every **Wednesday**. (NOT ~~I play tennis every Wednesdays.~~)
He wrote to every **child** in the village. (NOT ~~He wrote to every children ...~~)

70. When you say what somebody's job is, use *a/an*.

My sister is **a** photographer. (NOT ~~My sister is photographer.~~)
I'm studying to be **an** engineer. (NOT ~~I'm studying to be engineer.~~)

71. Use *at last*, not *finally*, as an exclamation.

At last! Where have you been? (NOT ~~Finally! Where have you been?~~)
She's written to me. *At last!*

72. *Get* can mean 'become', but not before nouns.

It's getting *cold*.
It's getting *to be* winter.
(BUT NOT ~~It's getting winter.~~)

73. Don't use negative questions in polite requests or enquiries.

Could you help me, please? (NOT ~~Couldn't you help me, please?~~)
You haven't seen John, have you? (NOT ~~Haven't you seen John?~~)

74. One negative word is usually enough.

She looked, but she *didn't* see *anything*. (NOT ~~She looked, but she didn't see nothing.~~)
I *have never* heard of him. (NOT ~~I haven't never heard of him.~~)

75. *Much* and *many* are unusual in affirmative sentences (except in a very formal style).

He has *a lot / plenty* of money. (NOT ~~He has much money.~~)
My father has travelled to lots of countries. (More natural than *My father has travelled to many countries.*)

76. Don't use *since* to talk about the future.

I'll be home *from* three o'clock. (NOT ~~I'll be home since three o'clock.~~)
The shop will be closed for two weeks *from* Monday. (NOT ~~The shop will be closed for two weeks since Monday.~~)

77. Singular fraction + plural noun: use a plural verb.

A third of the students *are* from abroad. (NOT ~~A third of the students is from abroad.~~)
A quarter of the trees *have* been cut down.

78. You *listen to* something.

She never listens *to* me. (NOT ~~She never listens me.~~)
Listen *to* this! (NOT ~~Listen this!~~)

79. Don't use the past progressive for past habits.

When I was 20 I *smoked* / I *used to smoke*. (NOT ~~When I was 20 I was smoking.~~)
I *played* / I *used to play* a lot of football at school. (NOT ~~I was playing a lot of football at school.~~)

80. Don't use *most of* directly before a noun.

Most of these people agree with me.
Most people agree with me.
(BUT NOT ~~Most of people agree with me.~~)

81. In 'unreal' conditions with *if*, use *would*, not *will*.

If I knew the price, I *would* tell you. (NOT ~~If I knew the price, I will tell you.~~)
It *would* be better if he told the truth. (NOT ~~It will be better if he told the truth.~~)

82. Don't use *later* with an expression of time to talk about the future.

I'll see you *later*.
I'll see you *in a few days*.
(BUT NOT ~~I'll see you a few days later.~~)

83. Don't use *in case* to mean 'if'.

Compare:
I'll take an umbrella *in case* it rains. (= '... because it might rain.')
I'll open the umbrella *if* it rains. (NOT ~~I'll open the umbrella in case it rains.~~)

84. Use *so* before an adjective, but not before adjective + noun.

I love this country – it's *so beautiful*. (NOT ~~I love this so beautiful country.~~)
Thanks for your help. That was *so kind* of you. (NOT ~~Thanks for your so kind help.~~)

85. Only use *unless* to mean 'except if'.

Compare:
I'll see you tomorrow *unless* I have to work.
I'll be really upset *if* I don't pass the exam. (NOT ~~I'll be really upset unless I pass the exam.~~)

86. Use *be* with adjectives, not *have* with nouns, to talk about physical sensations like cold, hunger, thirst etc.

I *am* thirsty. (NOT ~~I have thirst.~~)
We *are* cold in this house. (NOT ~~We have cold in this house.~~)

87. Don't use *to*-infinitives after *can*, *could*, *will*, *would*, *may*, *might*, *shall*, *should* or *must*.

I can *swim*. (NOT ~~I can to swim.~~)
Must you *make* so much noise? (NOT ~~Must you to make so much noise?~~)

88. Use *not*, not *no*, to make sentences negative.

I'm *not* asleep. (NOT ~~I'm no asleep.~~)

We are open on Saturdays, but *not* on Sundays. (NOT ~~... but no on Sundays.~~)

89. We don't usually use present tenses after past reporting verbs.

She told me she *had* a headache. (NOT ~~She told me she has a headache.~~)

I asked him what he *wanted*. (NOT ~~I asked him what he wants.~~)

90. Use *to* after *married*, *engaged*.

He's married *to* a doctor. (NOT ~~He's married with a doctor.~~)

My sister is engaged *to* a computer engineer. (NOT ~~My sister is engaged with a computer engineer.~~)

91. Use *which*, not *what*, to refer back to a whole sentence.

She passed her exam, *which* surprised everybody. (NOT ~~She passed her exam, what surprised everybody.~~)

My father has just climbed Mont Blanc, *which* is pretty good for a man of 75. (NOT ~~... what is pretty good for a man of 75.~~)

92. Don't use *the* with *society* when it has a general meaning.

We all have to live in *society*. (NOT ~~We all have to live in the society.~~)

Rousseau said that *society* makes people evil. (NOT ~~Rousseau said that the society makes people evil.~~)

93. Use a *to*-infinitive after *want*.

I want *to go* home. (NOT ~~I want go home.~~)

The children want *to stay* up late. (NOT ~~The children want stay up late.~~)

94. Use *make*, not *do*, with *mistake*.

I have *made* a mistake. (NOT ~~I have done a mistake.~~)

You can't speak a language without *making* mistakes. (NOT ~~... without doing mistakes.~~)

95. Don't repeat a relative pronoun with another pronoun.

There's the man *that* I work for. (NOT ~~There's the man that I work for him.~~)

She saw a doctor *who* sent her to hospital. (NOT ~~She saw a doctor who he sent her to hospital.~~)

96. After a superlative, use *in* with a place expression.

Which is the biggest city *in* the world? (NOT ~~Which is the biggest city of the world?~~)

This is the best restaurant *in* the city. (NOT ~~This is the best restaurant of the city.~~)

97. You *explain* and *suggest* something *to* somebody.

Please explain *to* me what you want. (NOT ~~Please explain me what you want.~~)

Can you suggest a good restaurant *to* us? (NOT ~~Can you suggest us a good restaurant?~~)

98. *Work* is an uncountable noun.

I'm looking for *work*. (NOT ~~I'm looking for a work.~~)

My brother has found *a new job*. (NOT ~~My brother has found a new work.~~)

99. Be careful of the word order in negative infinitives.

It's important *not to work* too hard. (NOT ~~It's important to not work too hard.~~)

I asked her *not to make* so much noise.

100. Possessives replace articles.

We stayed in *John's* house at the weekend. (NOT ~~We stayed in the John's house at the weekend.~~)
She's been studying *Britain's* foreign policy since 1980. (NOT ~~She's been studying the Britain's foreign policy since 1980.~~)

For more details, see *Practical English Usage* 3rd Edition section 70.