

Changing language

There are rules about the ways in which the words we use can be put together and spelt but it is important to remember that these rules can change. Different groups of people have had different attitudes to how we should use words and, as language is constantly changing, so too are the rules which control it.

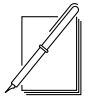
Some points worth remembering:

- William Shakespeare spelt his name many different ways – no-one seemed to mind! Until dictionaries became popular in the eighteenth century there were no ‘official’ lists of words so people usually just spelt the words as they sounded to them. Dictionary writers, then, had a great deal of power because they decided how words should be spelt.
- New words have had to be used when things were invented such as *telephone* and *refrigerator*. In recent years there has been a huge increase in new words because of the swift spread of information technology, for example, *program*, *byte* and phrases such as *surfing the net*.
- Paragraphs used to be indented (ie they began a little way in from the margin). Although this is still the case as far as handwritten work is concerned, more printed material has ‘blocked’ writing because this is how it is done on a word processor. Therefore the rules governing how we set out addresses on letters and on envelopes are changing because of developments in technology.
- Young people, especially, like to have their own language. They have words to describe things which are ‘good’ (eg hip, trendy, cool, wicked, top) or ‘bad’. These words go out of fashion very quickly.
- Many people find the use of the apostrophe difficult. You can spot this easily if you look at notices in shops. It is very possible, therefore, that the apostrophe to show ownership might be dropped in the future.
- Words evolve and change as people use them. You are much more likely to see *alright* written today than the more technically correct *all right*. Frequently, too, you will see *thank you* written as one word.
- Most people in the world today who speak English use American English and not British English. This has a tremendous impact on spelling in particular, eg *color* and *marvelous*. It also affects the choice of words. *Candy* is used in America instead of the word *sweets* and *trash can* is used instead of *dustbin*.

So, are all these people wrong? Language is a living thing. It is not static; it is in a constant state of change. The rules of grammar, then, respond to how people actually use language. They do not have the power to dictate how people actually speak and write. We are likely to be influenced much more by our friends, by television and films, by pop music and so on than by rules in a book. Nevertheless, by understanding these rules or conventions you can have considerable power. You will be able to make sure that people are aware of what you want to say and so your ideas will get the attention they deserve.

'Correct' grammar

The text below was written by Lewis Carroll in his novel, *Through the Looking Glass*. Although some words are not familiar, this text is grammatically correct, that is, it is in the expected order and patterns. The layout of the poem's rhyme scheme and line length are consistent too. The structure helps us to guess what the words mean.



- a Read the poem and in two or three sentences explain what happens in this text.



- b With a partner prepare a reading of the poem. Try to capture the different voices and their feelings. What clues are there in the text that help you to know what pace and emphasis to use? You might even be able to memorise it. Why might it be easy to remember even if the words are strange?



- c Underline the words that you do not know. Substitute other words from your vocabulary that you think would have the same meanings and make sense. (Do not worry about the names: Jabberwock, Jubjub, Bandersnatch, Tumtum.)



- d Carroll often created the new words by combining two existing words. Choose four of his words and discuss what the originals might have been, for example, *brillig* might have been *brilliant* and *light*.



- e Try your hand at creating ten new words by combining two other words or parts of words and then give your new words definitions. Remember they can be objects, action words or descriptive words.

Jabberwocky

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

'Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!'

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought-
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

'And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!'
He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

2 Shaping Sentences

Types of sentences

A sentence is a group of words which makes complete sense on its own. Sentences can be very long or very short so make sure that you are not guided by length alone.

My name is Jane

would be a sentence because it is a complete statement and makes sense on its own.

My name is Jane and I am going to

would not be a sentence because there is still some information missing. It is not complete on its own.



For each of the following put a tick in the appropriate box to show whether or not it is a sentence. No punctuation has been put in yet.

	Yes	No
1 We went to Spain last summer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Julie's brother was chosen for the football team	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 On my way home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 My mum is a vegetarian	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 All the colours of the rainbow	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 The cat chased the mouse	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 The baby cried	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 When I phoned my friend	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9 Our class visited the museum	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10 John played the guitar	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

All sentences should begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop. Let's look now at what else they have in common. In order for words to make complete sense (ie to be a sentence) they have to be about someone or something and we have to be told what that person or thing is doing, for example:

Sarah wrote a letter.

This sentence is about Sarah and what she has done has been to write a letter. Who or what a sentence is about is called the **subject**.

3 Identifying Word Classes

Nouns

The subject of the sentence will often be a noun or pronoun. Nouns are very common because a noun is the name given to a particular person or place, an object or an idea. Nouns do not only act as the subjects of sentences, of course, but this is one of the important jobs they do. There are four different types of nouns.

Proper nouns

A proper noun is the name of a particular person or place, for example:

Sarah	Brighton
Lake Como	Mars Bar
St John's Church	Madonna

Days of the week and months of the year are also proper nouns although, strangely, this does not usually apply to seasons. All proper nouns have capital letters, no matter where they come in the sentence.

Common nouns

Common nouns are usually objects but they also include living things, for example:

man	story
cat	chair
teacher	sky



Look at the list of nouns below. Next to each one put a P or a C to show whether it is a proper noun or a common noun. The proper nouns have been written without capital letters.

cambridge	photograph
keyboard	mrs jones
ruler	candle
wall	river thames
february	computer
tuesday	teacher

Abstract nouns

An abstract noun is the name of an idea or a feeling or a state of mind. This can be difficult to understand but remember that an abstract noun cannot be seen or touched, for example:

difficulty	war
happiness	fear
exhaustion	anger