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What is Grammar?

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When you think of “grammar,” what do you think of? Many people think of the parts of speech – nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections (see Handy Handout #294, “Parts of Speech” for more information about this topic). But grammar is so much more than just the parts of speech! “Grammar” is the set of rules that determine how sounds and words are put together in order to create sentences in a language. Grammar is the reason why, in the English language, we say “The sweet boy gently hugged the tiny cat” instead of “Gently the boy sweet the cat tiny hugged.” Some of the rules of grammar are learned spontaneously as babies grow and learn to talk by listening to the people speaking around them. Other rules are more complex and must be taught directly.

Are “Syntax” and “Morphology” the same as “Grammar”?

Many times, you will hear the words “syntax” and “morphology” when people talk about grammar. Syntax and morphology are each a part of grammar. “Syntax” refers to the order of words in a sentence. The rules of syntax allow us to make sentences using a variety of “formulas” ranging from very simple to complex. Here are some examples:

- noun + verb (“Boys run.”)
- article + noun + verb + article + direct object (“The boy hugged the cat.”)
- article + adjective + noun + adverb + verb + article + adjective + noun (“The sweet boy gently hugged the tiny cat.”)



“Morphology” is the study of how words are formed. Words are formed from morphemes. A “morpheme” is the smallest part of a word that has meaning. “Cat” is a morpheme; it has meaning. It means “a small, furry pet that meows.” The word “cats” has two morphemes – “cat” (“a small, furry pet that meows”) and the “s” on the end that means there is more than one.

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Some examples of morphology include:

- add an “-s” to the end of a noun to make it plural (“boy” becomes “boys” = more than one boy)
- add an “-er” to the end of a verbs to change it into a noun (“run” becomes “runner” = a person who runs)
- add an “-ed” to the end of a verb to show that the action happened in the past (“hug” becomes “hugged” = the hug already happened)

Why is Grammar Important?

Since grammar defines how sounds and words are put together to create sentences, using correct grammar ensures we are able to speak and communicate effectively with one another. If I didn’t understand English grammar, I might tell you, “cat hug boy.” You would be able to gather some meaning from my statement (for instance, I’m talking about a cat and a boy, and there is a hug involved), and you might be able to infer some additional information (since it is more likely that the boy is/was doing the hugging and the cat is/was the object being hugged), but you would not know if the hug has happened, is currently happening, or will happen in the future. Unless I have a firm grasp of English grammar, I won’t be able to communicate my thoughts and ideas clearly. And unless you have a firm grasp of English grammar, you won’t be able to understand the thoughts and ideas I am trying to communicate!

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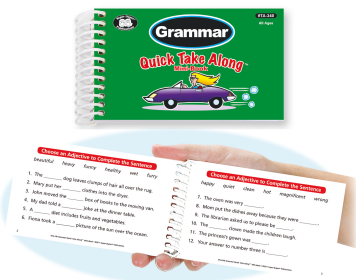
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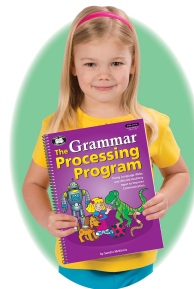
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