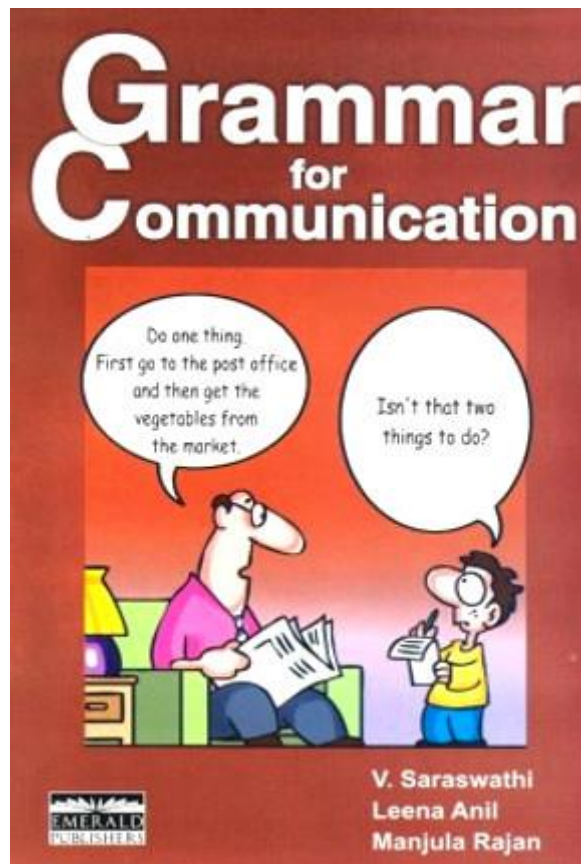# COMMUNICATIVE GRAMMAR
## № 1 September 2024



## Some Facts About Grammar You Can Use to Annoy Your Loved Ones

1) 'Grammar' is not grammar

Sure, you've probably heard some killjoy announce that this or that rule is not actually a *grammar* rule. Strictly speaking, the word "grammar" applies to the function of words and how they are combined to form sentences. "Usage" applies to how people actually use language and what habits they have. "Punctuation" applies to the symbols we use to direct the reader on how to read the words— where to pause, stop, apply ownership, etc. "Mechanics" applies to the spelling, capitalization, use of symbols and other conventions we use in writing. We've become lazy lately, and we refer to all these topics under the Grammar heading. Personally, I think the sin here is minimal, as we are aiming for concise and clear communication, which is GOOD.

2) Latin is DEAD (sorry, classics majors)

There is a good reason why applying grammatical logic from Latin—such as not splitting infinitives—makes no real sense for English: *English is not based on*

*Latin.* Sure it accumulated (or kept, since Romans were in Britain before the Anglo-Saxons arrived) some Latin words and phrases over the centuries, but for the most part, English comes to us from the Anglo-Saxon immigrants (invaders) who came to the island in the AD 400s-ish. These people came from the Angeln area of what is now Germany, and even though waves of other languages came—French Norman, Danish, more Latin, Gaelic, etc.—the Anglo-Saxon stuck. In fact, according to *The Story of English,* the 100 most-used words in the English language are Anglo-Saxon. *Man, wife, house, the, live, love, drink, fight, eat, sleep, child, brother, sister, you, is, to, for, but, at, on, in,* etc. all come from Anglo-Saxon roots.



3) And-per-se-AND

The number of letters in the English alphabet has varied over the centuries, but just before our current 26-letter alphabet, school kids were taught to recite the alphabet with the ampersand as the 27th letter. (See page 5 of *The Dixie Primer, for the Little Folks,* from the early- to mid-1800s.) The name "ampersand" comes from the song that used to go "X, Y, Z and per se AND." *Per se* is a Latin expression to mean *by itself*—since just saying "X, Y, Z, AND" was a bit awkward. Over the years, the words "and per se AND" morphed into "ampersand." The curly symbol, lately co-opted by hipsters and design professionals, is a cursive-y expression of the Latin word *et,* which means, you guessed it, *and.* Why it fell away is not exactly clear. Maybe purists decided using a symbol that was used for a word didn't fit with a list of letters that were used to make all sorts of words. Who knows.

4) How not to spell

If anyone ever says, "I before e, except after c", tell them to shut the hell up and learn to spell. In fact, it was while learning German that I finally learned a rule I could use. In German, if a word has *ie* or *ei*, you generally pronounce the long vowel version of the second letter. So *Fleisch* (meat) is pronounced with a long-I sound: FLYSH. *Liegen* (to lie down) is pronounced with a long-e sound: LEEGEN. Sure, this rule isn't fool proof in English, but it DOES help because, as I said in number 2, English has more in common with German that most other modern languages. It stands to reason that many of our words follow the same patterns of pronunciation. *Heist*, *field, wield, feisty* all seem to fit this idea. Though,

of course, it being a "rule" of English Grammar, it's almost certain that you can think of many, many exceptions. When it comes to spelling English words, memorization is really the best way.
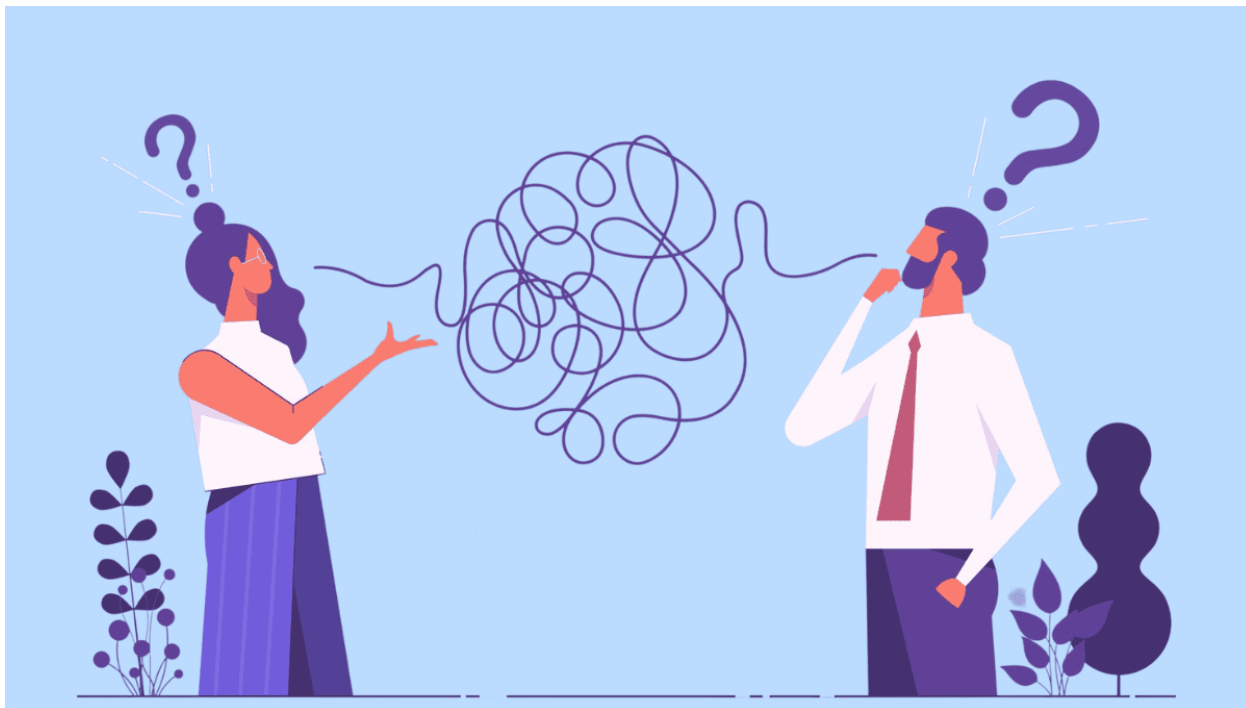


5) Not so nice

The meanings of words change all the time. Some words even shift to mean the opposite of the original meaning and then shift back again. Take the word *nice*, for example. From Bill Bryson's *Mother Tongue:*

A word that shows just how wide-ranging these changes can be is *nice*, which was first recorded in 1290 with the meaning of stupid and foolish. Seventy-five years later Chaucer was using it to mean lascivious and wanton. Then at various times over the next 400 years it came to mean extravagant, elegant, strange, slothful, unmanly, luxurious, modest, slight, precise, thin, shy, discriminating, dainty, and— by 1769—pleasant and agreeable. The meaning shifted so frequently and radically that it is now often impossible to tell in what sense it was intended, as when Jane Austen wrote to a friend, "You scold me so much in a nice long letter . . . which I have received from you."

To be continued …

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