



DO YOU SPEAK GOOD?

**Presented to Toastmasters
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Everybody knows the greatest joys in life.

One, DUH, is ice cream.

And the second, of course, is grammar.

Since become a vegan eight months ago—which means I don't eat meat or dairy—I've had to give up on the ice cream. That's been painful.

However, I cling to good grammar with a vengeance.

Of course, grammar doesn't come in moose tracks and you can't douse it in sprinkles. But it does not clog arteries and is delicious in its own special way. There's nothing more beautiful than a grammatically correct sentence.

I'm completely helpless when it comes to math or chemistry or remembering lines from movies, but give me a grammar conundrum, and I'm on the equivalent of a sugar high.

I realize that most people would rather devour a hot-fudge sundae than fuss over misplaced modifiers and dangling participles. I would, too, frankly.

But since I'm off dairy now, I have no choice but to go with second best: good grammar.

Some would call me a grammar snob, but I didn't ask for this. I can't help it: I hear and see things that jump out at me. Typos on the menu fly off the page ... signs on the side of the road blast misspellings ... I hear things that grate my ears like fingernails on a blackboard.

Let me be clear: I make plenty of grammatical errors. I write for a living, and I spend half my day on sites like GrammarGirl.com and Dictionary.com researching correct comma usage and the proper use of who and whom.

Well to save you the trouble of laboring over the intricacies of grammar, I thought I'd whip up a quickie lesson of three common grammar mistakes—and how you can avoid them.

#1

The “me versus I” issue.

This is a biggie...and a constant source of confusion for people. Let me give you a few examples:

- “Stan invited Susan and I to the movies.”
- “The minister called my husband and I weirdos.”
- “Me and Fido went to the vet this afternoon.”

All wrong. How do you know?

To check whether “I” or “me” is correct, remove the other person or people in the equation. The right answer will then be obvious:

“Stan invited Susan and I to the movies.”

- “Stan invited I to the movies.” NO
- “Stan invited ME to the movies.” YES

“The minister called my husband and I weirdos.”

- “The minister called I a weirdo.” NO
- “The minister called ME a weirdo.” YES

“Me and Fido went to the vet this afternoon.”

- “Me went to the vet this afternoon.” NO
- “Fido and I went to the vet this afternoon.” YES

#2

When subject and pronoun don't agree.

This is very common ... and admittedly very tricky.

When we use words like "each," "every," "everybody," "nobody," or "anybody," we're thinking about a number of people or things. But all those words are grammatically singular: They refer to just one person or thing at a time.

Yet we often hear things like:

Everyone must clean their shoes
Each student must clean their desk.

Using “their” with a singular subject is incorrect.

Easy fix:

Everyone must clean his or her shoes (correct but a little awkward)

Try a little sentence finagling:

- All guests must clean their shoes

- You must clean your shoes.
- Each student must clean his or her desk.
- All students must clean their desks.
- You must clean your desks.

#3 Beware the apostrophe catastrophe.

The apostrophe is nothing more than a little blip on a piece of paper, but it is so important. This small, hovering squiggly line is probably the most often misused punctuation mark out there.

But its importance in the world of writing can never be overlooked.

It has many uses ... one of which is NOT to create a plural.

Here is a sign I saw in Seaside:

Chocolate-Covered Oreo's – 5 for \$5.00

At a NY City magazine kiosk:

Bottle's of Water \$1.00 each

At a yard sale:

Artificial Flower's just \$2.00

I see this blunder all the time, and it causes me tremendous agita. The apostrophe is never used to create a plural. In these examples, it's OREOS not OREO'S. BOTTLES not BOTTLE'S. FLOWERS not FLOWER'S.

Among other things, the apostrophe is used to show possession:

- The dog's tail
- My cat's pajamas
- Her kids' trophies (plural possessive)

It can also be used to make contractions:

- It is = it's
- Who is = who's
- That is = that's
- Is not = isn't

So there you have my quickie vegan guide to the joys of life. I hope you go home and enjoy your ice cream, and I especially hope you come to appreciate good grammar as much as I do.

You don't have to be a word nerd like me, but writing and speaking well can be your ticket to a successful and rich life.