

Grammatically Speaking

*Richard Firsten explores English grammar
and answers your grammar quandaries.*

Dear Richard,

I know this isn't strictly a grammar question, but I do hope you'll help me out. I've been given an intermediate writing class to teach, and something I'd like clarification on is one of the uses of the hyphen. Does there have to be a hyphen in the following words I've italicized?

This was one of the first *well documented* cases of demonic possession.

Thanks for your help.

Caitlin Bradshaw
Louisville, Kentucky USA

Dear Caitlin,

When you have a compound adjective like the one you've put in italics, i.e., two or more words used together as one adjective, and the compound adjective comes before the noun it modifies as is typical in regular English word order, it should be hyphenated.

Punctuation is an aid to the reader to avoid confusion during the reading process. When a reader sees two or more words hyphenated, the understanding is that these words are to be considered as one word; in this case, as one adjective. That's the thinking behind the reason to hyphenate such compound adjectives. So you should write

... *one of the first **well-documented** cases* ...

However, if these two words follow the noun at some point, hyphenation is not required:

*This was one of the first cases of demonic possession that was **well documented**.*

Here are some more examples of compound adjectives that need to be hyphenated before the nouns they modify, and how they don't need hyphenation if they follow those nouns:

- *It's a **little-understood** phenomenon.
It's a phenomenon (that's) **little understood**.*
- *The project failed because of their **ill-conceived** plan.
The project failed because their plan was **ill conceived**.*

I'm glad you care about correct punctuation, Caitlin. Thanks for asking this question.

Dear Mr. Firsten:

I've tried to find an answer to this question on my own, but haven't had any success. That's why I'm turning to you for help. I think that one of the occupational hazards of teaching English is that if you mull something over in your mind long enough, you can end up getting all muddled!

My question: Is there a difference between saying *at the beginning* and *in the beginning*, or do they mean the same thing? Intuitively, I feel that there is a difference, but I can't pinpoint what that is. I hope you can help me out here.

Lisette Mendoza
Boulder, Colorado USA

Dear Ms. Mendoza:

There are times when both phrases are used interchangeably, but there does seem to be a difference between their underlying meanings.

We normally use *at the beginning* when we're thinking of the start of a specific event, at the moment that the event commences. In fact, it's quite common to mention the specific event by adding an appositive genitive (*of the ___*):

At the beginning of the school year, there was a need for more teachers.

We tend to use *in the beginning* when we're talking about the starting period. For example, a story or an event has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Those are the three main parts. When we're talking about that first main part or the starting period, we usually say *in the beginning*:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

When we use this generalized phrase *in the beginning*, it's not common to use an appositive genitive.

As I mentioned, there are times when these two phrases overlap, but I think what I've stated here explains the basic difference in usage. I hope this helps, Ms. Mendoza.

Dear Mr. Firsten:

Is a sentence like *I'm concerned about his health* in the passive voice? I know I can put this idea in the active voice and say *His health concerns me*, but I also know that I can't just make the typical switch we teach our students and say *I'm concerned by his health*. That just doesn't work. Can you please explain what's going on?

Passively Challenged
Bologna, Italy

Dear Passively Challenged:

I can see why this has become an issue. What you're dealing with isn't the passive voice, per se, but something we call an **adjectival passive**. We make this form by using a linking verb and the past participle of a verb to be used as an adjective.

Actually, we can check that this past participle is indeed an adjective now if we can use an adverb that shows degree before it. For example, you can say *I'm concerned*, but you can also say *I'm **very** concerned* or *I'm **quite** concerned*. That shows you this is an adjectival passive. In a real passive voice sentence, you can't stick in an adverb that shows degree (*The man was ~~very~~ arrested.* / *They've been ~~quite~~ promoted.*)

Thanks for sending in this question. This topic doesn't come up much in ELT textbooks.

Dear Richard,

When I teach prepositions, I don't have trouble explaining the difference between *over* and *above*. But when I come across *over* as an adverb, things get confusing. For instance, what exactly does *over* mean in a sentence like *Come over here*? Or maybe it doesn't mean anything?

I hope you use my question in your column. Thanks!

Andrzej Borkowski
Lublin, Poland

Dear Andrzej,

Oh, it definitely means something. When we use *over* in such phrases as *over here* and *over there*, we're implying that there isn't a great distance between two areas or things.

For example, if I live in Miami and I'm going to the Bahamas, which aren't far off the coast of Florida, I can say *I'm flying over to the Bahamas*. But if I live in Miami and I'm going to New York City, which is something like 1,300 miles away, I won't say *I'm flying ~~over~~ to New York*. In that case, I'll just say *I'm flying to New York*.

Thanks for asking this question, Andrzej. For some reason, it's not so easy to find this use for *over* in dictionaries.

Dear Richard,

A student of mine who recently had to use the services of one of these people asked me why the person is called a *notary public* instead of a *public notary*. I was at a loss. The student asked, of course, because she knows that the normal word order in English puts the adjective before the noun. So, is it okay to say *public notary*? And, by the way, can the plural be *notary publics*?

Another thing that really gets me is that if we're supposed to say *notary public*, why don't we also say *certified accountant public*? In that case, we say *certified public accountant*. This gets very confusing! Thanks for an answer.

Mitchell Cray

Salt Lake City, Utah USA

Dear Mitchell,

Wow! This certainly seems confusing, doesn't it! First, let's talk a bit about *notary public*, which is the correct job title, by the way. We have a few titles that came into English from French, and in French, the word order is typically noun + adjective, which is just how these terms were kept when they were translated into English. So *notaire publique* became *notary public* and *atorné general* became *attorney general*, to give you two examples. Since we pluralize nouns in English but not adjectives, the plural forms were *notaries public* and *attorneys general*.

Language changes, though, as we all know. Today we now accept *notary publics* and *attorney generals* as alternate plural forms, although some people still consider *notaries public* and *attorneys general* as more educated speech. That's up to you.

And as to why we don't say *certified accountant public*, that's because this term didn't come into English from French, so we've never had that word order carry-over for this term.

Thanks for a great question, Mitchell!

Now let's get to the Brain Teaser from my last column. The question was: A person is speaking at a business budget meeting. She says, "Profits have been really down for the past three quarters. Having said that, whatever money is available for raises must be tightly controlled."

Is there something wrong with what she said? If you think there is, what is it? If you don't think anything is wrong, why not?

This time there are two correct responses that came in first, each response discussing one aspect of the problems with the Brain Teaser sentence. Here's what Patrick Rosenkjar of Tokyo, Japan, has to say:

According to traditional grammar, there is something wrong with the sentence. The problem is that the initial phrase, *Having said that*, is a participial phrase that has been left dangling in the sentence. Normally such a phrase at the beginning of a sentence functions as an adjective that modifies the subject of the sentence; and the sentence surely means something like *Having said that, I maintain that whatever money is available for raises must be tightly controlled*. In this revised sentence the subject is *I*, and it is *I* who did the saying. However, in the sentence you cite, the subject noun phrase is *whatever money*, which is modified by the participial phrase in question. Since it is clearly nonsense for money to say anything, the sentence would be viewed as wrong by traditional grammar purists. Having said that, I would add, though, that in everyday conversations this construction is often used just as given in your sentence, and no one fails to understand the meaning.

Thanks for your column, which I never fail to enjoy.

And Kathy Burnell of Conway, New Hampshire, USA adds this:

Having said that really means something like, “despite the aforementioned.” A more appropriate conclusion would be *Having said that, we will do our best to provide raises for the highest performing workers.*

Thank you, Patrick and Kathy, for tackling this Brain Teaser and finding the two problems contained in the original sentence. As Patrick has pointed out, purists will say that we should immediately mention the subject right after saying *Having said that* so that this phrase is not left dangling. But I’m glad that Patrick has also pointed out that in conversational English, this kind of pat phrase has become acceptable because of the most typical meaning that Kathy brought to light, i.e., the idea of “however” or “in spite of what I’ve just said.” Well done, guys!

And now here’s a new Brain Teaser: Which choice in bold is correct in the following sentence?

Send a memo about the upcoming budget meeting
to **whoever/whomever** is working on the project.

Please e-mail your responses to GrammSpeaking@aol.com.

When writing to Grammatically Speaking, please include your name and location (city and state, province, or country). If your question or response is selected for publication, your name and location will be printed unless you specify otherwise.