



You know more about
grammar than you
think you do.

The Importance of Being Grammarian

When the topic of grammar is brought up, the image readily comes to mind of an English teacher lecturing on nouns, verbs, and dangling participles. We've all had that same English teacher and wondered what relevance an antecedent could possibly have in our lives.

When encountering the role of Grammarian in your Toastmasters club, your first thought may be that you don't know much about grammar. Anything you learned from that high school English teacher has long since faded from memory.

But you know more than you think you do. And you don't have to identify any grammar terms by their formal names. Unless, of course, you want to. So when asked to evaluate someone's grammar, start by simply listening – not so much to speech content as to each word and sentence. This forces you to pay very close attention to what is being said. If you're having trouble with eye contact, this is a great way to practice while letting someone else do the speaking!

As you hone your listening skills, watch for the following:

■ **Run-on Sentences.** You'll notice that some Toastmasters string sentences together with conjunctions instead of pausing briefly after each sentence. Conjunctions are connecting words, such as "and," "so," "but," and "because."

Chances are you won't find too many run-on sentences during prepared speeches. But they are common during impromptu speaking, such as Table Topics and evaluations.

■ **Word Crutches.** Crutches hold you up when you've injured a leg. Likewise, word crutches hold you up when you're nervous during a speech. They help fill the gap between one thought and the next. "You know" is a common word crutch. The speaker may not be aware he's saying them, but listeners will start to focus on those oft-

repeated words. Audience members may even start counting how many times the speaker uses the words. And suddenly they're no longer focusing on the speech content.

See how important the Grammarian already is? But this is only a start. Pay attention to the following language infractions as you continue to develop your skills:

■ **Gender Usage.** Public speakers should try to use gender-neutral job titles and avoid stereotyping. Look for usage guidelines in dictionaries and newswriting stylebooks.

■ **Taboo Language.** This covers off-color jokes, profanity and anything racist or sexist. Should this type of language creep into a Toastmaster's speech, the Grammarian needs to point it out so that the practice won't continue. What is and what isn't taboo speech is subject to the personal preferences of each audience member; what one may find offensive another may not. When one Toastmaster used the word "toilet" in a speech, his evaluator was so upset that she blocked out the entire speech!

Simple word usage affects how the audience reacts to a speech. As your listening skills grow, listen for the following problems with words:

■ **Redundant Words and Phrases.** You'll be surprised at how many phrases use unnecessary words. Check these out:

INSTEAD OF:	USE:
Absolutely essential	Essential
At a later date	Later
Color of blue	Blue
During the course of	During
If at all possible	If possible
Month of January	January
With reference to	About

Sometimes these “impressive” phrases can actually lessen the impact of a message. And certainly, if a Toastmaster is close to the timing requirements of a speech, such redundancies take up valuable seconds better used elsewhere.

Now that your skills as Grammarian have grown, you’re ready to take up a challenge with a few more complex things to look for.

■ **Factual Errors.** One veteran Toastmaster described a general marching into war, with “medals shining on his chest.” Having been in the military and to war, I had to point out that soldiers don’t actually wear their medals in combat (if he did, the general would be an obvious target!). Even the smallest factual mistake can discredit an entire speech, so it is important to make the speaker aware of it.

■ **Jargon and acronyms.** Every industry has its own buzzwords and technical terms. While using these terms may be appropriate in a specific business environment, an average audience may not know what some of these words mean. To be safe, follow the example of one Toastmaster, who in her second speech defined an acronym for the audience and then used the acronym throughout the rest of the speech, occasionally reminding the audience what it stood for.

■ **Clichés.** Clichés are phrases that have been used so many times that they have become virtually meaningless. The easiest way to tell if a phrase is a cliché is if you’ve heard it before. Usually, when a phrase becomes popular, you will see it on TV, in advertisements, and in newspapers. How many times have you seen “state of the art” or “scored some points”? There’s nearly always a better way to say something than using a cliché.

■ **Trademarked Words.** Sometimes a product name becomes so well-known that it actually becomes more common than the generic term for the product. Still try to use the generic name whenever possible. Kerosene, mimeograph and fiberglass are all examples of product names that became ordinary words through everyday usage. Look for trademarked words being used as ordinary words, such as making a “Xerox copy” or “using a Kleenex.”

This list of things to look for might seem a little overwhelming at first. Start with listening for one element and then add another one the next time you’re Grammarian. Soon both you and your club members will benefit from your newfound skills. **I**

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Mantra for the New Year

1. Take into account that great love and great achievements involve great risk.
2. When you lose, don't lose the lesson.
3. Follow the three R's: respect for self, respect for others, responsibility for all your actions.
4. Remember that not getting what you want is sometimes a wonderful stroke of luck.
5. Don't let a little dispute injure a great friendship.
6. When you realize you've made a mistake, take immediate steps to correct it.
7. Spend some time alone every day.
8. Open your arms to change, but don't let go of your values.
9. Remember that silence is sometimes the best answer.
10. Live a good, honorable life. Then when you get older and think back, you'll be able to enjoy it – a second time.
11. A loving atmosphere in your home is the foundation for your life.
12. In disagreements with loved ones, deal only with the current situation. Don't bring up the past.
13. Share your knowledge. It's a way to achieve immortality.
14. Be gentle with the earth.
15. Once a year, go someplace you've never been before.
16. Remember that the best relationship is one in which your love for each other exceeds your need for each other.
17. Judge your success by what you had to give up in order to get it.
18. Approach love and cooking with reckless abandon.