

Using Parts of Speech

Once we understand the eight parts of speech, we can apply that knowledge to punctuation, word usage, and writing style.

Punctuation

Punctuation is based on grammar, not on when you pause. Do not put a comma before the conjunction in a simple compound:

Dickens was **tired and sleepy**.

Dickens and Austen were novelists.

Do use a comma before the conjunction in a list, even though trendy advice sometimes says not to. When it is a list, please use the comma:

Dickens was **tired, sleepy, and worried**.

Word Usage

Once we understand the parts of speech, our vocabulary usage becomes easy. We can identify *rebuke*, *reprove*, *condescend*, and *writhe* as verbs, and we identify *aloof*, *abashed*, *grotesque*, *serene*, and *amiable* as adjectives. Words such as *portent*, *phenomenon*, *countenance*, *fervor*, and *diffidence* are obvious nouns.

Writing: Be Thoughtful about Nouns and Verbs

Parts of speech teach us to use fewer modifiers. We begin to realize that the noun and the verb are the best words, and when we find ourselves about to use an adjective, we ask ourselves, “Why do I need this adjective? Did I not use a good noun?” As Strunk and White recommended in their classic book *The Elements of Style*, we try to write with nouns and verbs that are good enough that they do not need to be modified. Modifiers can clog sentences with distracting extra syllables.

Mark Twain

Quotations on the Art Writing

Here are four well-known quotations by the American writer Mark Twain (1835-1910), whose real name was Samuel Langhorne Clemens. The words *mark twain* meant two fathoms in riverboat parlance. With novels such as *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Twain established himself as the premier American writer of his time. Consider the following principles of writing that he asserted, and identify the ideas that you believe will help you most.

"I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English—it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in. When you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don't mean utterly, but kill most of them—then the rest will be valuable. They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are wide apart. An adjective habit, or a wordy, diffuse, flowery habit, once fastened upon a person, is as hard to get rid of as any other vice."

"To get the right word in the right place is a rare achievement. To condense the diffused light of a page of thought into the luminous flash of a single sentence, is worthy to rank as a prize composition just by itself.... Anybody can have ideas—the difficulty is to express them without squandering a quire [24 sheets] of paper on an idea that ought to be reduced to one glittering paragraph."

"The rules governing literary art require that the author shall say what he is proposing to say, not merely come near it."

"The rules governing literary art require that the author shall use the right word, not its second cousin."