

Contents

Note: the numbers are section numbers, not page numbers.

There are more detailed contents pages at the start of each chapter.

Introduction to the Cambridge Grammar of English 1–4
 From word to grammar: an A–Z 5–81

Spoken language

Introduction to grammar and spoken English 82–91
 From utterance to discourse 92–103
 From discourse to social contexts 104–122

Grammar and discourse

Grammar across turns and sentences 123–139
 Grammar and academic English 140–154

Word and phrase classes

Introduction to word classes and phrase classes 155–166

Nouns

The noun phrase 167–175
 Nouns and determiners 176–196
 Pronouns 197–212

Verbs

Verb phrase 1: structure of verb phrases 213–216
 Verb phrase 2: tense and aspect 217–226
 Types of verb 227–235

Adjectives and adverbs

Adjectives and adjective phrases 236–241
 Adverbs and adverb phrases 242–249

Prepositions and particles

Prepositions and prepositional phrases 250–257

Word formation

Word structure and word formation 258–268

Sentence and clause patterns

Introduction to sentences and clauses 269–280
 Verb complementation 281–289
 Clause types 290–303
 Clause combination 304–318
 Adjuncts 319–337

x | Introduction to the *Cambridge Grammar of English*

Time

Present time 338–345

Past time 346–360

Future time 361–376

Notions and functions

Modality 377–407

Speech acts 408–423

Questions 424–433

Negation 434–447

Condition 448–459

Comparison 460–471

Information packaging

Word order and focus 472–475

The passive 476–487

Speech representation 488–502

Appendices

Word clusters and grammar 503–505

Punctuation 506

English spelling 507–511

Numbers 512–525

Referring to the time 526

Units of measurement 527

Nationalities, countries and regions 528

Irregular verbs 529

North American English grammar 530–538

Glossary 539

Bibliography 540

Index 541

Cambridge Grammar of English

Introduction to grammar and spoken English

- Spoken language** 82
- Everyday informal conversations** 83
- The notion of standard spoken grammar** 84
- Panel: Grammatical acceptability** 85
- Spoken grammar and real-time communication** 86
 - Unplanned speech 86a
 - Simple phrasal structures 86b
- Clause combination** 87
 - Real-time communication 87a
 - Subordinate clauses 87b
 - Clausal blends 87c
- Position of items** 88
- Pausing, repeating and recasting** 89
 - Pausing 89a
 - Repeating and recasting 89b
- Organising the discourse** 90
- Spoken grammar and interpersonal communication** 91

Introduction to grammar and spoken English

SPOKEN LANGUAGE

82

Until recently, items and structures most typically found in spoken communication have not been fully described. Most grammars of English have had a bias towards the written language. It is only recently that advances in audio-recording and associated technology have made it possible for sufficient quantities of spoken language to be used for analysis.

This chapter focuses on spoken English in its own right. Most chapters of this grammar book include mention of differences between spoken and written grammar and aspects of context that affect choices of grammar. Those chapters give more detailed examples of items and structures described in this chapter.

It is difficult fully to represent spoken grammar in a written book. Although the corpus used as the source of examples in this book provides useful evidence of spoken usage, the corpus has not been systematically coded for phonetic and prosodic features. Variations in stress, intonation contour, voice quality and other aspects such as loudness and tempo, rhythm and length of pauses are not indicated. And the citations from the corpus are presented in written form so that there always remains an underlying bias towards writing in the transcription itself.

This bias towards written language also means that appropriate terms for describing special features of spoken grammar are not always available in existing grammatical frameworks. In some cases new terminology has to be introduced. An example is the use of the terms *headers* and *tails* in 96–97.

The chapters on spoken English in this book are constructed on the basis of four main features of spoken language:

- 1 Spoken language happens in real time and is typically unplanned.
- 2 Spoken language is most typically face to face.
- 3 Spoken language foregrounds choices which reflect the immediate social and interpersonal situation.
- 4 Spoken language and written language are not sharply divided but exist on a continuum.

The four features overlap. For example, the very fact that spoken language typically occurs face to face means that it is usually unplanned. It should also be acknowledged that written language involves social and interpersonal choices, for example in the writing of personal letters or emails, or in constructing persuasive arguments.

EVERYDAY INFORMAL CONVERSATIONS

83

The following extract from an informal, casual conversation illustrates several of the important features of informal spoken grammar. The features are used regularly by speakers of British English across different regions and contexts of

use and by speakers of different ages, genders, social classes and occupations. Potentially problematic areas for a traditional, written-based grammar book are highlighted in bold.

[Four speakers are sitting at the dinner table talking about a car accident that happened to the father of one of the speakers. At the end of this sequence they switch to another topic. *I'll just take **that** off* and *Have you got hold of **it**?* are references to a large pan which is on the dinner table.]

The = sign indicates an utterance which is cut short

The + sign indicates an interrupted turn which continues at the next + sign

A: *I'll just take that off. **Take that off.***

B: **All looks great.**

C: [laughs]

B: *Mm.*

C: *Mm.*

B: *I think your dad was amazed wasn't he at the damage.*

A: *Mm.*

B: *It's not so much the parts. It's the labour charges for=*

D: **Oh that. For a car.**

B: *Have you got hold of it?*

A: *Yeah.*

B: **It was a bit erm=**

A: *Mm.*

C: *Mm.*

B: **A bit.**

A: *That's right.*

B: **I mean they said they'd have to take his car in for two days. And he said all it is is straightening a panel. And they're like, 'Oh no. It's all new panel. You can't do this'.**

C: **Any erm problem.**

B: **As soon as they hear insurance claim. Oh. Let's get it right.**

C: **Yeah. Yeah. Anything to do with+**

A: **Wow.**

C: **+coach work is er+**

A: **Right.**

C: **+fatal isn't it.**

A: **Now.**

The following features can be observed:

- 1 Sentences in the written sense (i.e. units beginning with capital letters, consisting of at least one main clause and ending in a full stop) are difficult to identify in spoken language. What seems more important is the production of adequate communicative units and the taking of turns rather than the transition from one sentence to another.
- 2 Speech is marked by small units of communication often consisting of just single words or phrases, rather than complete sentences, and these units may be separated by pauses, intakes of breath, falls and rises in pitch, and so on (e.g. *Oh that. // Right. // Any problem.*).

- 3 The minimal unit of communication is the tone unit, which consists of at least one intonation contour which ends in a rising or falling tone. If a unit does not have one such intonation contour, it is heard as incomplete. A tone unit typically coincides with a clause, hence the clause may be considered the basic unit of grammar in spoken language, but tone units can also be phrases or single words:

Complete tone units: stressed syllables in bold capitals

I'm **LOOK**ing for a **PEN**cil.

AREn't you **REA**dy?

I **KNOW**! it's **CRA**zy!

(two tone units: two falling tones)

DID she?

ANYway.

ME?

Incomplete tone units: stressed syllables in capitals

I'm **LOOK**ing for a ...

(incomplete because no rising or falling tone is present, only a level tone)

DID she ...

- 4 Speakers' turns, unlike written sentences, are not neat and tidy. The speakers regularly interrupt each other, or speak at the same time, intervene in another's contribution or overlap in their speaking turns. And any transcript of a real conversation is much less tidy than the layout of a dialogue in a drama script or in a course book for learning a language.
- 5 Listeners are not just passive recipients. There are back-channel items (e.g. *Mm, Yeah*), by which listeners give feedback, and other (normally supportive) responses (e.g. *Right*).
- 6 There are abandoned or incomplete structures (e.g. *It was a bit erm ... A bit.*). 'Incomplete' structures rarely cause any problem of understanding, and can be collaboratively completed by others. For example, the utterance *For a car* shows one speaker completing the utterance of another.
- 7 References to people and things in the immediate situation may be incomprehensible to an outsider reading the transcript. The speakers say *Take that off* and *Have you got hold of it?* Without being present at the time of speaking or without a considerable amount of previous text, it is not clear at all to an outsider what *that* and *it* refer to, or *off* where it is supposed to be removed.
- 8 'Subordinate' clauses are present but they are not always obviously connected to any particular main clause (e.g. the clause *As soon as they hear insurance claim*).
- 9 There are structures which are difficult to label (is the second *Take that off* an ellipted form of *I'll just take that off*? Is it an imperative? What is the status of *And they're like? Like* appears to function here to mark a direct speech report (i.e. *And they said ...*). (For this use of *like*, see 49 and 501e.)

- 10 Ellipsis is common (e.g. [it] *All looks great.*). Ellipsis occurs when words usually considered ‘obligatory’ (e.g. a subject for a verb in a declarative clause) are not needed because they can be understood from the immediate context or from the knowledge which is shared between speakers. For speakers and listeners, there are no words ‘missing’, and what we call ellipsis is simply an economical and sufficient form of communication which is different from the typical grammar of written English, where greater elaboration and specification is usually necessary because the written text is usually being read at a different time and place from when it was created.
- 11 Some ‘words’ have an uncertain status as regards grammar. (e.g. *Wow. Now.*) For example, *wow* has an exclamative function, showing the speaker’s reaction to something that has been said or that has happened, and seems to stand on its own. *Right* and *now* at the end of the extract seem to be organisational or structural (rather than referring to time), functioning to close down one topic or phase of the conversation and to move on to another phase. This use of *right* and *now* is a discourse-marking use. Such frequent words often connect one phase of the discourse with another and are outside of ‘grammar’ when grammar refers to the structure of phrases, clauses and sentences. ❖ **113 Interjections and 106 Discourse markers**
- 12 Despite these special characteristics of spoken transcripts, it is important to remember that the majority of grammatical items and structures are equally at home in speech and writing. In this chapter the emphasis will be on those structures which are most frequently found in the everyday informal conversations in the spoken corpus used in the creation of this book and which differ most markedly from the grammar of the texts in the written corpus.

THE NOTION OF STANDARD SPOKEN GRAMMAR

84

The term ‘standard grammar’ is most typically associated with written language, and is usually considered to be characteristic of the recurrent usage of adult, educated native speakers of a language. Standard grammar ideally reveals no particular regional bias. Thus ‘Standard British English’ grammar consists of items and forms that are found in the written usage of adult educated native speakers from Wales, Scotland and England and those Northern Irish users who consider themselves part of the British English speech community.

The typical sources of evidence for standard usage are literary texts, quality journalism, academic and professional writing, etc. Standard grammar is given the status of the official record of educated usage by being written down in grammar books and taught in schools and universities.

Spoken transcripts often have frequent occurrences of items and structures considered incorrect according to the norms of standard written English. However, many such forms are frequently and routinely used by adult, educated native speakers. Examples of such structures are split infinitives (e.g. *We decided **to immediately sell it***), double negation (e.g. *He **won’t** be late **I don’t** think*, as compared to *I **don’t** think he **will** be late*), singular nouns after plural measurement expressions (e.g. *He’s about six **foot** tall*), the use of contracted forms such as *gonna* (*going to*), *wanna* (*want to*), and so on.

❖ **539 Glossary** for any unfamiliar terms

Standard spoken English grammar will therefore be different from standard written English grammar in many respects if we consider 'standard' to be a description of the recurrent spoken usage of adult native speakers. What may be considered 'non-standard' in writing may well be 'standard' in speech.

Speech and writing are not independent. Although some forms of spoken grammar do not appear in writing (unless in written dialogues), there is considerable overlap and there is an increasing range of forms appearing in informal written texts which previously were only considered acceptable in speech. In 120 the presence of typically spoken grammatical forms in such contexts as emails and internet chat-room exchanges is discussed.

Grammatical acceptability

85

In this book the following criteria* are adopted for grammatical acceptability in British English to determine whether or not an item or structure is included. 'Widespread' here means across speakers of both genders and across a wide range of ages and social and regional backgrounds.

- Included: in widespread use in both the written and spoken corpus (most forms are in this category).
- Included: in widespread use in both the written and spoken corpus but not approved in more prescriptive grammar books and often avoided by many writers of formal English, for example, split infinitives, stranded prepositions (e.g. *That's the woman I gave it to*, compared with *That's the woman to whom I gave it*).
- Included: rare or not occurring in the written corpus but widespread and normal in the spoken corpus (→ for example, 96 Headers and 97 Tails), and vice versa.
- Not included: regionally or socially marked in the written and/or spoken corpus but widespread and normal within major regional/social varieties of British English (→ for example, the use of *ain't*, 119b).
- Not included: non-occurring and unacceptable in all varieties of British English (for example a structure such as *he did must speak*).

SPOKEN GRAMMAR AND REAL-TIME COMMUNICATION

86

Unplanned speech

86a

Spoken language is normally unplanned. There are occasions when what is said is memorised or read aloud from a script, but speech mainly takes place in real time. It is 'online' communication, it is spontaneous and there is normally very little time for advance planning.

Because thinking time is limited, pauses, repetitions and rephrasings are common. The flow of a communication may also be affected by interruptions or by overlaps with other speakers or by external factors in the speech situation (e.g. a phone ringing may take someone temporarily away).

In writing there are usually opportunities to plan and hierarchically structure the text. The writer can usually rephrase or edit what is written. In speech, utterances are linked together as if in a chain. One piece of information follows after another and speakers have few opportunities for starting again.

* Our thanks to Susan Hunston for suggesting this list of categories.

Simple phrasal structures

86b

Structures which are often quite complex in writing (e.g. heavily modified noun phrases, embedded clauses) are often simplified in real-time informal speech. Some examples are discussed here and in **94 Situational ellipsis**.

Pronouns

The 'online' nature of spoken communication means that pronouns are often preferred to nouns. Pronouns are only rarely modified and are therefore easier to construct and allow speed of communication. They also indicate the shared context of the speakers and reflect the face-to-face nature of the communication, where references are often to persons and things in the immediate situation.

Pronouns referring to things in the shared context are in bold in this extract:

[four people are assembling a child's portable bed, for which they have instructions]

A: **It** should fit there cos **it's** not that big I don't think.

B: **It's** warm in here, shall I turn **that** down?

A: We've got the instructions anyway.

C: I thought you'd organised **it** ... just put **it** by the window or something.

D: D'you want me to take **that**?

B: Ooh ... then there's bedding for about ten people here [laughs].

Full noun phrases

The use of multiple modifiers before a head noun in a noun phrase rarely happens in everyday informal speech. Speakers are alert to the constraints which listeners are under in processing information. In informal conversation there is an overwhelming preference for a very simple structure of determiner (+ one adjective) + noun such as:

Yeah it's **a big house, six bedrooms**.

(compare the possible alternative: It's a big, six-bedroom house.)

It's **a large house, lovely, just right**.

However, in writing, it is not difficult to find more complex adjectival structures:

Living in **a big, dirty, communal house** eating rubbish ...

The **cosy, lace-curtained** house ...

Simple noun phrases are not a *rule* of spoken grammar, but it is a very strong tendency. Any speaker may use a structurally complex noun phrase in spoken communication (for example in a public speech or presentation), but in casual conversation they will probably be heard as rather formal. Similarly, a writer may wish to create a more informal, interactive and dialogic style and may make such choices for different expressive purposes.

Phrasal chaining

The constraints of thinking-time mean that speaker turns typically contain phrasal chunks of information built up in stages, often by means of sequences of adjective phrases or of simple noun phrases. This accounts for the basic

170 | Introduction to grammar and spoken English

characteristic of spoken grammar as being more like the strung-together coaches of a train or links of a chain rather than a carefully constructed hierarchy of embedded structures, one inside the other:

*For that time of year you need a polo-shirt or something, **light, cool**, you know **short sleeves, cotton**.*

(compare: a light, cool, short-sleeved, cotton shirt)

*I mean Andy is very **talented ... good teacher, good diplomat, nice bloke**.*

(compare: Andy is a nice, talented, good, diplomatic person and teacher.)

❖ **167–175 The noun phrase, 197–212 Pronouns and 140–154 Grammar and academic English** for a wider range of examples of premodification and postmodification with reference to nouns and pronouns in both spoken and written contexts

❖ also **236–241 Adjectives and adjective phrases**

CLAUSE COMBINATION

87

Real-time communication

87a

One of the most notable features of clause combination in informal spoken English is the way in which clauses are strung together in a sequence with one clause unit added to another in a non-hierarchical way.

The needs of real-time communication do not allow the speaker time to construct over-elaborate patterns of main and subordinate clauses. Much more common are sequences of clauses linked by coordinating conjunctions (*and*, *but*, *or*) or by simple subordinating conjunctions such as *because* (frequently contracted to *cos*) and *so*, which often function more like coordinating rather than subordinating conjunctions:

[the speaker is talking about her friend, Melanie, who was looking for a part-time job]

*Well, no, Melanie's actually still a student **and** she still has ten hours of lectures a week, **so** she works in McDonald's in her spare time **cos** she needs the money **and** she works in McDonald's in Hatfield ...*

[the speaker is describing a motor accident in which she was involved]

*I was driving along talking to Sue **and** we'd, like, stopped at some traffic lights **and** then – bang – there was this almighty crash **and** we got pushed forward all of a sudden.*

[speakers are talking about discrepancies in a colleague's wages]

A: *I bet they've paid her for Sunday not paid her for the Bank Holiday, Friday and Monday. **Cos** that would make your nine hours wouldn't it.*

B: *Yeah. **Cos** she's got the Saturday down the same as I did **cos** we all did the Saturday.*

A–Z 23 *Because/cos*

Subordinate clauses

87b

Informal spoken English includes subordinate clauses that occupy complete speaker turns. Such clauses often occur in conversation when one speaker takes over and maintains another speaker's topic or when another speaker provides a further comment. They often occur after a pause, or after brief feedback from a listener and often function to evaluate what has been said (such clauses are in bold in the examples below):

A: *So I turned round and chased after him.*

B: **Just as I would have done.**

[talking about what is covered in an insurance policy]

A: *Oh I – I don't remember.*

B: *I just got liability.*

A: *Just liability.*

B: **Which is good enough.** *At least it's insured.*

(comment after feedback from the listener)

A: *Well actually one person has applied.*

B: *Mm.*

A: **Which is great.**

A: *They charge nearly a hundred pounds a week. But that's the average there, you know.*

B: *Mm.*

A: **Though it's all relative I suppose.**

For further examples ❖ 123–139 Grammar across turns and sentences

Clausal blends

87c

Sometimes clausal 'blends' occur. A blend is a syntactic structure which is completed in a different way from the way it began. The blend is, however, usually communicatively complete, effective and easily understood:

In fact, that's why last year they rented a nice house, in er Spain, was it, is that it was near the airport.

(more likely in writing or careful speech: The reason they rented a nice house in Spain last year was that it was near the airport.)

They've nearly finished all the building work, hasn't it?

(more likely in writing or careful speech: They've nearly finished all the building work, haven't they? Or: All the building work has been finished, hasn't it?)

❖ 539 Glossary for any unfamiliar terms

POSITION OF ITEMS

88

The nature of spontaneous speech means that items often appear in positions that are dictated by communicative needs and by people's thoughts as they unfold. Compared with written English, in much casual conversation in English, positioning is generally more flexible.

Adjuncts may occur after tags, and adjuncts which do not normally occur in end position in written text regularly occur in end position in informal speech:

*Spanish is more widely used isn't it **outside of Europe**?*

(compare: Spanish is more widely used outside of Europe, isn't it?)

*I was worried I was going to lose it and I did **almost**.*

(compare: I was worried I was going to lose it and I almost did.)

*You know which one I mean **probably**.*

(compare: You probably know which one I mean.)

*Are my keys in the door **still**?*

(compare: Are my keys still in the door?)

PAUSING, REPEATING AND RECASTING

89

Pausing

89a

Pauses can be unfilled or filled. An unfilled pause is simply a silence, normally only a silence of a second or two. Longer silences are rare in casual conversations and may be heard as problematic by participants. Unfilled pauses tend to occur when a shift in topic or a change in direction is about to occur. They often coincide with syntactic boundaries such as clause units:

Pauses of longer than one second are indicated by dots [...]

A: *I spoke to her last night and ... well, she's not going to take the job.*

B: *How is he taking the divorce thing?*

A: *Okay, I suppose ... Are you planning on shopping this afternoon?*

A filled pause is marked by a vocalisation such as *er* or *erm* (also written as *uh* and *um*) or a lexical form such as *like*, *well*, *you know*. A filled pause can mark a shift in topic, especially when accompanied by discourse markers such as *right* or *well* or *okay* (which commonly initiate a new stretch of discourse). They may also often indicate that speakers have not finished what they want to say and wish to continue:

I suppose, er, she'll, she'll take over next week then?

[A is on the telephone, then finishes that conversation (*Bye bye.*) and speaks to B (*Sorry about that.*)]

A: *Thanks ever so much. Bye bye. Sorry about that.*

B: *That's okay. Er, right, where were we?*

From word to grammar: an A–Z

<i>About</i> 5	<i>Each</i> 34	<i>Opposite, in front (of)</i> 62
<i>Above</i> 6	<i>Especially</i> 35	<i>Over</i> 63
<i>According to</i> 7	<i>Even</i> 36	<i>Own</i> 64
<i>Across</i> 8	<i>Ever</i> 37	<i>Person</i> 65
<i>Actual, actually</i> 9	<i>Every</i> 38	<i>Pretty</i> 66
<i>After, afterwards</i> 10	<i>Except</i> 39	<i>Quite</i> 66
<i>After all</i> 10	<i>Expect</i> 40	<i>Rather</i> 67
<i>Afterwards</i> 10	<i>Explain</i> 41	<i>Really</i> 68
<i>Against</i> 11	<i>Fairly</i> 66	<i>Right, rightly</i> 69
<i>All</i> 12	<i>Fall</i> 42	<i>Round</i> 18
<i>Allow</i> 48	<i>Fell</i> 42	<i>Since</i> 70
<i>Already</i> 13	<i>Fetch</i> 29	<i>So</i> 71
<i>Also, as well (as), too</i> 14	<i>Few, Fewer</i> 50	<i>Still</i> 72
<i>Although, though</i> 15	<i>For</i> 43	<i>Stuff</i> 74
<i>Always</i> 16	<i>Get</i> 30	<i>Take</i> 29
<i>Among</i> 26	<i>Go</i> 30	<i>Then</i> 73
<i>Anyway</i> 17	<i>Hardly</i> 44	<i>There</i> 45
<i>Apart from</i> 39	<i>Here, there</i> 45	<i>Thing, stuff</i> 74
<i>Around, round</i> 18	<i>Hope</i> 40	<i>Though</i> 15
<i>As</i> 19	<i>In</i> 21	<i>Too</i> 14
<i>Ask (for)</i> 20	<i>In fact</i> 46	<i>Under</i> 25
<i>As well (as)</i> 14	<i>In front (of)</i> 62	<i>Until</i> 24
<i>At</i> 21	<i>Just</i> 47	<i>Wait for</i> 40
<i>Back</i> 22	<i>Less</i> 50	<i>Want</i> 75
<i>Because/cos</i> 23	<i>Let</i> 48	<i>Well</i> 76
<i>Before</i> 24	<i>Like</i> 49	<i>Whatever</i> 77
<i>Below</i> 25	<i>Little, a little, few, a few</i> 50	<i>While</i> 78
<i>Beneath</i> 25	<i>Make</i> 51	<i>With</i> 79
<i>Besides</i> 39	<i>Mean</i> 52	<i>Worth, worthwhile</i> 80
<i>Between, among</i> 26	<i>Mind</i> 53	<i>Yet</i> 81
<i>Bit, a bit (of)</i> 27	<i>Now</i> 54	
<i>Both</i> 28	<i>Of</i> 55	
<i>Bring, take, fetch</i> 29	<i>Of course</i> 56	
<i>By</i> 24	<i>Oh</i> 57	
<i>Come, go</i> 30	<i>Okay/OK</i> 58	
<i>Cos</i> 23	<i>On</i> 21	
<i>Do</i> 31	<i>Once</i> 59	
<i>Down</i> 32	<i>One</i> 60	
<i>During</i> 33	<i>Only</i> 61	

From word to grammar: an A–Z

The individual words described here have been selected for special attention because they are:

- very frequent in everyday language
- often polysemous (that is, they have more than one meaning)
- individual in some way in their grammar, possessing characteristics that are worthy of particular note
- known to be difficult for learners of English and often lead to errors.

ABOUT

5

Preposition *about*

5a

The most frequent meaning of *about* as a preposition is ‘on the subject of’ or ‘connected with’:

*Er, I'm not too sure **about that**.*

*He became very anxious **about the condition of two of his patients**.*

*We've only just started making enquiries **about him**.*

*I've already told you what I feel **about the appointment**.*

*Why is she always going on **about it**?*

A less frequent use is as a synonym of *round* or *around*:

*The dog was running **about the garden** all day.*

About can be contrasted with *on*, which focuses on more specific and detailed content:

*He gave a lecture **about Karl Marx**.*

*She gave a lecture **on the position of English adverbs in spoken language**.*

Adverb *about*

5b

About is used as an adverb in expressions of time, number and quantity. It is used to express approximation and can be replaced by *around*. It also occurs in the phrase *round about*. It is more common in spoken than in written English:

*I'll see you **about six** then?*

*That was **about six years ago** wasn't it?*

*The suspect was **about 1.7 metres tall**.*

*The main changes took place **round about 1860** at the time of the shift away from agriculture as main source of employment.*

22 | From word to grammar: an A–Z

About is rare without a complement. Particular uses are:

*Is John **about**?*

(Is John here/in the neighbourhood/in town?)

*There's a lot of flu **about** at the moment.*

A–Z 18 Around, round

❖ 103b Approximations

Be about to

5c

Be about to means 'be on the verge of doing something':

*We were just **about to leave**.*

*She looks as if she's **about to burst into song**.*

Common spoken uses of about

5d

About is common in spoken English when a speaker is orienting a listener to a topic:

***About that car of yours**, do you still want to sell it?*

***About Fran**, she can call in to see your grandmother, can't she?*

What about is common in questions when the speaker points out something or wishes to orient the listener to a topic:

***What about all the cuts** in education and in housing?*

***What about Andreas?** Isn't he coming with us?*

What about, *how about*, and very informally, *how's about* are commonly used to make suggestions:

***What about moving that bookshelf** into the other room? It would give us a bit more space.*

How about an ice-cream?

***How's about going to Kyoto** for the day?*

❖ 421a What about, what if, how about

About after nouns

5e

Some common nouns are frequently followed by *about*. These include:

anxiety

argument

assertion

assumption

complaint

concern

debate

discussion

doubt

enquiry

feeling

fuss

idea

information

joke

misgiving

news

point

qualm

question

reservation

scepticism

speculation

statement

story

talk

uncertainty

worry

*It is dangerous to make too many **assumptions about** basic cognitive processes.
 She's always making a **fuss about** our bedrooms being untidy.
 Is there any **news about** the people trapped in that avalanche?*

About after verbs

5f

Many common verbs are followed by *about*. They include:

<i>agonise</i>	<i>forget</i>	<i>reminisce</i>
<i>ask</i>	<i>fret</i>	<i>speak</i>
<i>bother</i>	<i>hear</i>	<i>speculate</i>
<i>care</i>	<i>know</i>	<i>talk</i>
<i>chat</i>	<i>learn</i>	<i>think</i>
<i>complain</i>	<i>moan</i>	<i>wonder</i>
<i>enquire</i>	<i>quibble</i>	<i>worry</i>
<i>feel</i>	<i>read</i>	<i>write</i>

*They **agonised** for ages **about** changing their car.*

*More and more people are beginning to **speculate about** a change of management.*

★ *About* is not used with the verb *discuss*:

*We wanted to **discuss** the arrangements for Chinese New Year.
 (We wanted to discuss about the arrangements for Chinese New Year.)
 I wanted to **discuss** ways of improving the essay.*

Note, however, that *about* is used with the noun *discussion*:

***Discussions about** the situation took place yesterday.*

About is used after *complain*:

*They didn't know what to do when people came to **complain about** the goods they had bought.
 (They didn't know what to do when people came to complain the goods they had bought.)*

About after adjectives

5g

Many common adjectives are followed by *about*. They include:

<i>apprehensive</i>	<i>fussy</i>	<i>snobbish</i>
<i>blasé</i>	<i>happy</i>	<i>sorry</i>
<i>cautious</i>	<i>knowledgeable</i>	<i>sure</i>
<i>concerned</i>	<i>nervous</i>	<i>unhappy</i>
<i>coy</i>	<i>optimistic</i>	<i>upset</i>
<i>enthusiastic</i>	<i>pessimistic</i>	<i>uptight</i>
<i>excited</i>	<i>sceptical</i>	<i>worried</i>

*The minister was far too **blasé about** public opinion and in the end the media forced his resignation.*

*She's very **nervous about** flying in charter aircraft.*

→ 539 Glossary for any unfamiliar terms

24 | From word to grammar: an A–Z

*Ah, I'm really **sorry about** this.*

*She is more **worried** than she should be **about** her exam results.*

ABOVE

6

Preposition *above*

6a

Above means 'higher than'. It has a meaning that is close to the preposition *over*. Its opposites are *below* and *beneath*. In both the following sentences *over* can be substituted for *above*:

*There was a faded sign **above the door**.*

*Once the plane got **above the clouds** and levelled out, they started to relax.*

Above is preferred when things are at an upper level:

*They lived in a small bungalow **above the village**.*

(They lived in a small bungalow over the village.)

Above can only be used when there is no contact between the people or things referred to. *Over* or *on top of* have a more general meaning and can be used whether or not one person or thing touches or covers another:

*He put a light plastic raincoat **over his jacket**.*

(or: on top of his jacket)

(He put a light plastic raincoat above his jacket.)

Above can be used to refer to a higher part, usually of a building, or to a higher structure or place. It can also be used to refer to an increase in size or scale:

*Nairobi is about 2000 metres **above sea level**.*

*Their performance was distinctly **above average**.*

Above is also used metaphorically, often meaning 'a long way from' or 'is superior to'. It can also have a sense of being difficult to understand. *Beyond* is also possible in such phrases:

*She is **above suspicion** and **above reproach**.*

*I'm afraid that type of mathematics is all rather **above me**.*

Above modifying nouns

6b

Above can be used in writing as a premodifier to refer to something which has already been mentioned in the text. The fixed phrase *the above* means 'the foregoing text'. *Below* cannot be used in this way as a premodifier, and *the below* is not possible:

*As we can see from **the above figures**, the profits are likely to be significantly lower this year.*

*As we have argued in **the above**, the results are not convincing.*

Cambridge Grammar of English

Both *above* and *below* can postmodify a noun:

*There was noise coming from the **room above**, so I couldn't sleep.*

*The **picture below** is a striking example of new methods of advertising.*

★ *Above* is not normally used with numbers. *Over* is normally preferred:

*You can only buy alcoholic drinks here if you are **over 18**.*
 (~~*You can only buy alcoholic drinks here if you are above 18.*~~)

*It'll cost **over a thousand pounds** to repair.*

A–Z 25 *Below*; 63 *Over*

ACCORDING TO

7

According to meaning 'as reported'

7a

The most frequent use of *according to* is when reference is made to external evidence to support a statement or an opinion:

According to the safety experts, it was all right when they left it.

It's the same in every block, according to Cliff, the caretaker.

This delay, according to Mr Mckay, probably violated federal law.

It's going to be delayed, according to what Nick told us.

According to is frequently used to refer to statistics, official reports, surveys, opinion polls, studies, research, etc., especially in more formal contexts:

According to a recent report by the National Food Alliance, children are being saturated with advertisements for sugar-rich confectionery.

And regional government, according to a poll taken last month by Gallup, attracts the support of less than one in three of the public.

★ Note that *according to* refers to evidence from someone or somewhere else. As such, it usually has a third person referent. It cannot be used to refer to one's own views or statements:

In my opinion all those sites should be made green-field sites.
 (~~*According to me/according to my opinion, all those sites should be ...*~~)

According to meaning 'in agreement with'

7b

According to is also used to mean 'in line with', 'in harmony with' or 'depending on'. In this meaning it is most typically not used in front position:

And is it all going according to plan so far?

26 | From word to grammar: an A–Z

*If the police acted **according to the law**, then they should arrest him.*

[talking about placing people on a salary scale]

*I'm sure they probably grade people **according to their experience**.*

*Prices vary very slightly **according to whether** you want 'hotel' or 'hostel' service.*

A closely related phrase is *in accordance with*, which is used in formal, written contexts to mean 'in obedience to', or 'strictly following (rules and regulations)':

*The Socialist government, elected in 1994, resigned in December, but, **in accordance with the constitution**, the President had to call on the Socialist party to form another government.*

ACROSS

8

Across is used as a preposition and as an adverb:

*It's just not enough time to get **across London**.*

(preposition)

[giving directions]

A: *You keep going down until you get to the massive traffic-light complex. You know you're at it. It's sort of bright and there's a big main road running **across**.*

B: *Right.*

(adverb)

★ *Across* is not a verb. The verb form is *cross*:

*Every time you **cross** the road, you're worried you're going to get knocked over.*

(Every time you ~~across~~ the road, you're worried you're going to get knocked over.)

Across can be used to indicate movement or position relative to two sides or extremes of something:

[referring to a newspaper article]

*In the paper there's somebody who's going to swim **across the Atlantic** four thousand miles.*

*She sat facing me **across the table**.*

When indicating position relative to another person or thing, with the meaning of 'opposite', 'on the other side of the road to', *across* is used with *from*:

*The Town Hall is **across from the cathedral**.*

Across is often used in contexts of comparisons to indicate a range of something:

*The researchers carried out a study **across 20 countries**.*

Across is also used to refer to the width or diagonal measurement of something. It follows the unit of measurement:

*First, a copy; he slipped a minidisk into the port, formatted and labelled it.
 Barely **two centimetres across** – easy to lose, but easy to hide.*

Across is also used to refer to an area in which things are distributed:

*There are other smaller sites, scattered **across the Caribbean** and even in the Mediterranean.*

Across and over

8a

Across and *over* are sometimes interchangeable with little difference in meaning:

*She walked on **across the bridge** in the bitter wind.*

*She put her arm around his waist and led him **over the bridge**.*

However, when the meaning is ‘from side to side’ of a surface, *across* is preferred:

*Draw a line **across the middle of the page**.*
 (~~Draw a line over the middle of the page.~~)

*He glanced at his watch and strode **across the room**, Julian’s dressing-gown flapping around his legs.
 (~~... and strode over the room, ...~~)*

Across and through

8b

When there is a surrounding environment, movement is usually expressed by *through*, not *across*:

*It’s very pretty in the summer **walking through the orchards**.*
 (~~It’s very pretty in the summer walking across the orchards.~~)

A–Z 63 Over

ACTUAL, ACTUALLY

9

★ *Actual* and *actually* refer to whether something is true or factual. They do not refer to time:

*They went into a restaurant ... or it was **actually** a café.*
 (it was in fact/in reality a café)

*I’m not really sure about the **actual** procedure.*
 (This means ‘the right/correct procedure’; if the meaning had been ‘the procedure that is used now’, the speaker would have said *I’m not really sure about the **present/current** procedure*, or *I’m not really sure about the procedure **now/nowadays***.)

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*She's **actually** working for a computer firm.*

(This means something like 'She is in fact working for a computer firm', or 'Surprisingly, she is working for a computer firm', depending on the context; if we mean 'She is at the present time working for a computer firm', we would say *She's working for a computer firm **at the moment/(right)now.***)

Actual

9a

Actual usually has a meaning similar to 'true', 'real', 'precise', 'right/correct' or 'the thing/person itself/himself/herself':

*I couldn't get an appointment for **that actual day**.*
 (that precise/exact day)

***My actual involvement** with the project itself was negligible really.*
 (my real/true involvement)

[sales assistant (A) talking to a customer in a camera shop]

A: *You don't know which model it is, do you?*

B: *No, I can look it up. Maybe I'll come in with **the actual camera**.*
 (the camera itself)

A very common expression with *actual* is *in actual fact*, which is an emphatic form of *in fact*:

*But **in actual fact**, a year ago the situation was the same.*

A–Z 46 In fact

Actually

9b

Actually can often be used emphatically, especially to refer to something which is in sharp contrast with expectations:

*He **actually admitted** that he enjoyed it.*
 (this was unexpected, not normal behaviour for him)

*There **actually is a plant** that produces what is known as 'the curry leaf'.*

*The original connection with Dave was **actually more through jazz** than through folk music.*

Actually often implies a contrast between a desirable and an undesirable situation:

*So, here is a practical seminar that **actually offers solutions** to the challenges women managers face.*
 (implied: in contrast to most other seminars)

*Unlike a blender or liquefier, the juicer **actually separates the juice** from the pulp.*

Actually often operates as a discourse marker in spoken language, signalling topic openings, contrasts in topics, specifying within topics, etc.:

[customer (A) at the information desk in a large bookshop enquiring about a technical manual]

A: *Could you tell me where your manuals are kept? **Actually** I'm looking for a Haynes manual.*

B: *Er what on?*

A: *It's on washing machines.*

[beginning of a one-to-one student tutorial at a university; A is the student]

A: *Where would it be best for me to sit?*

B: *Um, anywhere there's a space.*

[pause]

A: *Well **actually** there's a couple of things really really quickly to ask you. One is about the draft of my history of English essay.*

When used in questions, *actually* can often focus on 'missing' information which the speaker desires or needs for the purposes of the conversation:

[speakers are already talking about B's father]

A: *What did your dad do **actually**?*

B: *Well he was a railway man.*

Actually is often used to hedge statements, making them less direct or less threatening:

*I think Sandra would win hands down **actually**.*

*We had an argument **actually**, a few weeks ago.*

In spoken language *actually* is frequently used in end position, though it may also occur in front and mid positions:

A: *In the afternoon we'll continue with the tour into the training department and on through into the machine division.*

B: *I'd be quite interested in that **actually**.*

AFTER, AFTERWARDS

10

Preposition *after*

10a

After is most frequently used with noun phrases referring to time or to timed events:

*You get used to that, strangely enough, **after a while**.*

*So I'll do those two classes. I'll start probably **after the holidays**.*