

Lesson 1



Grammar Guru: Happy New Year, Louis!

Louis: Happy New Year to you too, Mr. Walters!

Grammar Guru: It's nice to see a familiar face. Come on in out of the cold and have a seat.

Louis: Thanks! I don't mind if I do. So how were your holidays?

Grammar Guru: The cruise was fantastic, although I must admit it is nice to be back home. Whoever coined the expression "There's no place like home" sure was onto something.

Louis: Ha. It sure as heck wasn't a Quebecker. If it was, then they weren't *onto* something, they were just plain *on* something. Have you seen the forecast for tonight? They are calling for another thirty centimeters of snow!

Grammar Guru: Cheer up, my friend. Look on the bright side: being cold means having to warm up. And what better way to warm up than with one of my homemade spiced warm winter ales? My Tutti Frutti lager is on special this month: a delightful blend of cherry, pineapple and fruitcake flavours. How about it?

Louis: That sounds tantalizing... exotic, but tantalizing. I'll try one.

Grammar Guru: Trust me! You won't regret it!

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Louis: So I see not much has changed since we left off last month. Hang on a minute... is that the plaque that I gave you hanging on the wall above the beer taps?

Grammar Guru: It sure is. It's a nice touch, don't you think? I also got this new specials board which will double as a chalkboard for our grammar discussions.

Louis: Oh right, grammar. I was beginning to forget why I came by! Heh heh. Just kidding. As a matter of fact, I have really been looking forward to getting back into grammar again.

Grammar Guru: Me too, to be honest. We have considerable ground to cover over the coming months. To start things off, I would like to continue with a few more verbal forms before moving on to some of the main nominal forms. Shall we get down to it?

Louis: Let's!

Grammar Guru: Well, I know it may seem like eons ago, but do you remember what I said at the outset of our discussions back in September?

Louis: Hmm. Let me think. I remember you lecturing me about not bringing any paper. You also said that while for the most part you are known as the Grammar Guru, people sometimes refer to you as the Grammar Geek, and that you don't like the Toronto Maple Leafs or the Montreal Canadians.

Grammar Guru: Yes, I did say all of that. I see that you retained the... ahem... essentials. But do you remember anything else, or did all of that Christmas egg nog over the holiday layoff give you memory damage?

Louis: Hang on a minute. Oh, right, you also talked about the approach that you were going to take. You said that you were not going to inundate me with lists of rules to be memorized. Your approach to grammar teaching is primarily meaning-based, not rule-based.

Grammar Guru: Yes, that was what I said. It pleases me to see that you do remember. You see, rules can be useful, but the thing to remember about a rule is that it provides only a partial view of the whole picture. Let's take the progressive form for instance, a form which, you will recall, we have talked about already.

Louis: Hang on. You're not going to tell that chicken joke again, are you?

Grammar Guru: Ha, ha. You can relax. No, I'm not.

Louis: Phew!

Grammar Guru: Now, many grammar books correctly point out that we use the progressive for “activities going on at the moment of speaking”, as illustrated in a sentence such as *I am watching the game right now so I can't come to the phone*. Admittedly this is true for many cases; however, this rule does not cover cases such as *Here comes trouble* or *I quit!* where the *coming* and the *quitting* are happening as the speaker says them. This rule also does not explain why the progressive is rare with verbs of perception and inexistents with stative verbs, which both evoke a situation as existing at the moment of speaking. If someone is looking at someone through binoculars, then they will usually say “I see him” and not “I am seeing him”. Likewise, no one would say *The earth is being round*.

Louis: Right. It's all coming back to me now!

Grammar Guru: Now then, in order to come to grips with what a teacher would need to call “exceptions”, he or she could decide to introduce more rules. What I don't like about this approach is that it gets confusing pretty quickly for students: language is presented as an unordered mass of individual facts with no grounding in anything stable. For people like you who are looking to go on to teach English, it helps to have a deeper, more unified understanding of the language. For this, another kind of approach is necessary.

Louis: That's where meaning comes in, right?

Grammar Guru: Exactly. While I will inevitably use rules from time to time, my approach is primarily meaning-based: my goal will be not only to make you more aware of grammatical forms, but also to sensitize you to their underlying meanings. In doing so, you will see that language is not based on arbitrary rules, but that it is grounded in something stable and rational: meaning. As a professor, I used to say, “Language users don't make rules, grammarians do.”

Louis: I already got a taste of the approach in our previous discussions.

Grammar Guru: Indeed you did. You also got a good taste of my beer selection.

Louis: Heh heh. I sure did. So what form are we going to discuss first? My grammar buds are ready.

Grammar Guru: First up is the *infinitive*, a form which occupied a great deal of my research time when I was a professor, as a matter of fact.

Louis: As in “to be or not to be”?

Grammar Guru: Yes, Hamlet’s famous words. And if you ever watched that old show Star Trek, then you will have heard my own personal favourite: “to boldly go where no man has gone before”. This is what they call a split infinitive, by the way.

Louis: The split infinitive. I remember I had an English teacher back in high school who told us that splitting an infinitive was a definite no-no.

Grammar Guru: Funny you mention that. I too had a teacher, Mr. Syme, who told us the same thing. And old Mr. Syme also had a habit of giving us a pretty good whack on the wrists with his yardstick whenever we stepped out of line! And yet, if you listen to what speakers actually say, you’ll find that splitting the infinitive is quite acceptable.

Louis: I wonder where all the controversy got started?

Grammar Guru: Well you can thank my grammarian predecessors for that one. The source of the disagreement can be traced back to the nineteenth century, to two texts in fact: one written by an anonymous American in 1834, and Henry Alford’s *Plea for the Queen’s English* in 1864. These writers objected to infinitive splitting because it wasn’t common practice at the time. This objection caught the attention of the wider public and splitting infinitives went on to be understood as a rule to be followed, rather than as a mere observation of what the situation was at the time.¹

Louis: Well, there you go then.

Grammar Guru: Now in addition to this form of the infinitive, which I will refer to as the *to*-infinitive, there is another one which grammarians usually refer to as the *bare* infinitive. We see the bare infinitive in examples like *I can **dance** if I want to, But I did **leave** a tip, or Let it **be**.*

Louis: Geez, Mr. Walters, you grammarians sure love to make life difficult for us poor students. I mean, why are there two forms of the infinitive? Isn’t one enough?

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Split_infinitive

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Grammar Guru: Well don't blame me for making them up; blame speakers of English. An English speaker's decision to use one over the other depends on what message they wish to convey. For instance, when would I say *I had 20 people to call last night*?

Louis: Well, I guess I can see that being said in a context where you had a list of 20 people that needed to be called. Maybe there was a promotion on beer that you wanted to tell them about.

Grammar Guru: Right. Or maybe I was organizing a class reunion for my old high school. In either case, the calling is considered to be an obligation. Whether or not I actually called the 20 people is not made explicit: maybe I did or maybe I didn't. Now let's see what happens if we drop the preposition *to*: we get the sentence *I had 20 people call last night*. When would you say this?

Louis: I can see you saying that if 20 people actually called you. Maybe you had advertised a promotion in the newspaper and they were phoning to find out more about it.

Grammar Guru: Precisely! Here I am no longer the person with the obligation to call. Rather, I was on the receiving end of 20 calls, as in I wasn't sure if anyone would see the tiny ad that I put in the paper this week for my special 2-for-1 nachos event. Surprisingly, I had 20 people call! So do you see? There is a significant difference in meaning whether one uses *to* or not.

Louis: That's neat how one little word can make all the difference. I never thought of *to* as having meaning before.

Grammar Guru: Actually, you are not alone. Many grammarians claim that *to* is meaningless, a claim which does not seem to be supported very well by what people actually say.

Louis: So what exactly does *to* mean?

Grammar Guru: You ask a very relevant question. The meaning of *to* is of course more abstract than the meaning of a noun like, say, *dog* or a verb like *eat*. We can, however, get a fairly good idea of its meaning by analyzing its use as a preposition. Let's take the sentence *I walked from my house to the movie theatre*. Here *to* establishes a relation between two physical locations: my house and the movie theatre.

my house $\xrightarrow{\text{to}}$ movie theatre

Louis: So far I follow you.

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Grammar Guru: Good. Now then, let's look at a sentence like I wanted to eat those nachos. Here *to* also establishes a relation between two things as well, but this time between two events:

wanted $\xrightarrow{\text{to}}$ eat those nachos

While our previous example evoked a relation between two points in space, here *to* evokes a relation between two events in time. *To* signifies that the infinitive's action comes after, or is supposed to come after, something else. In this case, the subject had the feeling of wanting before they even touched the nachos.

Louis: Okay, I think I am getting it. So in other words, there is a before-after relationship there.

Grammar Guru: Yes, that is an accurate way of putting it. Let's go back to our examples with calling then. In the sentence *I had 20 people to call*, we observed that the meaning of *have* is that of "I had the duty or obligation to do something". Since the obligation exists prior to any phone calls taking place, the preposition *to* is necessary to evoke the movement from before to after. Now, in the sentence *I had 20 people call*, *have* means 'experienced'. It is the same sense of *have* that you find in a sentence such as *I had trouble with my car this morning* or *I had a hard time convincing him*. In this example, the incoming calls and experiencing of those calls are not in a before-after relationship. They coincide in time, whence the absence of *to*.

Louis: I think I understand. So I guess you wouldn't say something like *I never had a student to get that mad at me before*.

Grammar Guru: No, one would say just *get mad* since once again, *had* evokes the idea of *experienced*.

Louis: Likewise, I guess you would not say *I had ten tables of hungry customers serve*. You would have to say *to serve*.

Grammar Guru: Very good. Now in addition to 'obligation' and 'experience', *have* also has other meanings. Consider these two sentences: *I have Joseph my guardian angel to guide me* and *I have Joseph my guardian angel guide me*. In the former, the meaning of *have* could be characterized as that of 'hold at one's disposal': *Life is not always easy, but fortunately I have Joseph my guardian angel to guide me. If I ever need guidance, it is nice to know that he is there.*

Louis: That makes sense. What about the latter?

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Grammar Guru: In the latter sentence, the meaning of *have* is closer to that of ‘request’: the speaker is saying that Joseph guides him whenever requested to do so. For example, *My kids drive me nuts, but in order to help me cope I have Joseph my guardian angel guide me. I ask him what to do and he tells me how to proceed.*

Louis: I see the contexts, but can you explain the before-after relationship to me?

Grammar Guru: Good question. In the former, the subject holds the angel at his disposal, a situation which exists prior to whether or not he actually asks the angel for guidance or not. In the latter, there is an assumption on the part of the requester that the requested action expressed by the infinitive will automatically be carried out. It is as though the requesting and the guiding are not separated in time, which is why the bare infinitive is used.

Louis: Alright, I get it now.

Grammar Guru: Let me test you with this example then: would you say *He had the family chauffeur drive him to school* or **to drive**?

Louis: I would say that both work there.

Grammar Guru: Right. If you say ‘drive’, we know that the chauffeur indeed drove the person to school on one or several occasions: Roderick was a bossy little brat who liked to order people around. He even had the family chauffeur drive him to school. What a little twerp! If you say ‘to drive’, it is possible perhaps that the speaker never even used the chauffeur: Roderick just loved to walk to school. He had the family chauffeur to drive him if he wanted, but he never even asked him.

Louis: I understand.

Grammar Guru: I see that the place is starting to fill up, so I will have to wrap up today’s lesson with a quick look at two other verbs which can be used with both types of infinitive: make and go. Take make for starters. I could say one of two things: They made the robot to perform several different tasks or They made the robot perform several different tasks. In which one did the robot actually perform tasks?

Louis: The second one.

Grammar Guru: Right. In the first one, the speaker is simply saying that the robot was built with a certain purpose in mind, i.e. to perform several different tasks: When the engineers designed it, they made it

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to perform different tasks. It was even supposed to be able to make breakfast! In the second one, the speaker refers to the fact that the robot actually performed a variety of different jobs on a specific occasion: By pushing different buttons on the remote control they made the robot perform several different tasks: it even scratched my back!

Louis: I need to get myself one of those robots. I wonder if they make one that can read books and write essays.

Grammar Guru: Dream on! You get another interesting contrast with the verb *go*. Take these two sentences: *They go get their mail every day at the post office* and *They go to get their mail every day at the post office*. In which one might the poor people never get any mail?

Louis: Ha! The second one.

Grammar Guru: Right. In the first one, there is the idea that there is always mail to be picked up. It is as though the speaker perceives the going and the getting as making up one single action, and so the bare infinitive is used because there is no separation into a before and an after. In the second one, on the other hand, there is no guarantee that there will be mail. The going is perceived as existing first, and the getting of the mail as the goal of their trips to the post office. The going is presented as real, but the getting is thought of as a possibility whose realization is merely aimed at.

Louis: Speaking of going and getting, I have to *go get* my bus! I need to head to the grocery store and pick up a few things for supper tonight.

Grammar Guru: Oh yeah? Dare I ask what is on the menu? Maybe I'll invite myself over.

Louis: Just the usual: Kraft Dinner and Coke. Shall I set up an extra TV table?

Grammar Guru: Aaah yes... staples of the university student's diet. On second thought, I think I'll stick around here if you don't mind. I should be able to rustle up something a little more nutritious to eat.

Louis: Suit yourself then.

Grammar Guru: We sure covered some good ground today. We will continue talking about the infinitive next time we meet.

Louis: Shall we meet again in a week from now?

Grammar Guru: Sounds great. You know where to find me.