

From word to grammar: an A–Z

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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.*

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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:

<i>anxiety</i>	<i>enquiry</i>	<i>question</i>
<i>argument</i>	<i>feeling</i>	<i>reservation</i>
<i>assertion</i>	<i>fuss</i>	<i>scepticism</i>
<i>assumption</i>	<i>idea</i>	<i>speculation</i>
<i>complaint</i>	<i>information</i>	<i>statement</i>
<i>concern</i>	<i>joke</i>	<i>story</i>
<i>debate</i>	<i>misgiving</i>	<i>talk</i>
<i>discussion</i>	<i>news</i>	<i>uncertainty</i>
<i>doubt</i>	<i>point</i>	<i>worry</i>
	<i>qualm</i>	

Cambridge Grammar of English

*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.*

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*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?*

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*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**.*