

## 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:

*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.*

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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.*

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**.*