

## Grammar tips to help unlock the meaning

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Grammar can help.

Here are grammar tips that I use to confront a stubborn Proustian passage or sentence that just won't yield to my understanding. I do a parsing which, though not infallible, will often pierce through my fog.

1. Identify the subject and the predicate and bracket out the subordinate clauses for later reflection.
2. Identify the referents of pronouns (he, she, it, this, that, ... etc.) The most nettlesome pronoun is "it"; if a subject is introduced, say "heart" or "despair", and then for several pages all we read is "it", by the time we come gasping to the end, we've forgotten what "it" refers to.
3. If I encounter a simile ("just as X, so Y"; or "Like X, Y is ..." or other equivalent structures), I make sure I can identify both parts (both X and Y).
4. Take note of multiple occurrences of a significant word or phrase within a passage.

These tips seem obvious, I'm almost embarrassed to set them down. Yet, I find, with Proust, they are often simple linchpins that unlock the meaning.

Here is an example of #2 where the pronoun is "you" (in bold). While this short paragraph is not at all difficult, you still need to know who "you" is to "get" it.

What does "you" (in bold) refer to?

"Lovely Sunday afternoons under the chestnut tree in the garden at Combray, carefully emptied by me of the ordinary incidents of my own existence, which I had replaced by a life of foreign adventures and foreign aspirations in the heart of a country washed by running waters, **you** still evoke that life for me when I think of **you** and **you** contain it in fact from having gradually encircled and enclosed it—while I went on with my reading in the falling heat of the day—in the crystalline succession, slowly changing and spanned by leafy branches, of **your** silent, sonorous, redolent, and limpid hours." (SW, Davis, p 89.2)

"Sweet Sunday afternoons beneath the chestnut-tree in the garden at Combray, carefully purged by me of every commonplace incident of my personal existence, which I had replaced with a life of strange adventures and aspirations in a land watered with living streams, **you** still recall that life to me when I think of **you**, and **you** embody it in effect by virtue of having gradually encircled and enclosed it—while I went on with my reading and the heat of the day declined—in the crystalline succession, slowly changing and dappled with foliage, of **your** silent, sonorous, fragrant, limpid hours." (SW, M/K/E, Vol 1/6 p 121.1 Mod. Lib.)

"Beaux après-midi du dimanche sous le marronnier du jardin de Combray, soigneusement vidés par moi des incidents médiocres de mon existence personnelle que j'y avais remplacés par une vie d'aventures et d'aspirations étranges au sein d'un pays arrosé d'eaux vives, **vous**

m'évoquez encore cette vie quand je pense à **vous** et **vous** la contenez en effet pour l'avoir peu à peu contournée et enclose - tandis que je progressais dans ma lecture et que tombait la chaleur du jour - dans le cristal successif lentement changeant et traversé de feuillages, de **vos** heures silencieuses, sonores, odorantes et limpides." (page 190, GF-Flammarion, 1987 Du Côté de chez Swann)