Part of the Quick and Dirty Tips website is a popular feature called Grammar Girl. It's perfect for a simple answer to some nagging grammatical problem. Check out all the other neat features as well!
Lay Versus Lie

Today's topic is lay versus lie.

Lay Versus Lie

First, we'll do the easy part, which is the present tense.

If you exclude the meaning "to tell an untruth" and just focus on the setting/reclining meaning of lay and lie, then the important distinction is that lay requires a direct object and lie does not. So you lie down on the sofa (no direct object), but you lay the book down on the table (the book is the direct object).

This is in the present tense, where you are talking about doing something now: you lie down on the sofa, and you lay down a book.

There are a bunch of ways to remember this part.

How to Remember the Difference

*Or check out one of the usage dictionaries from the Mid-Hudson Library System. The Merriam-Webster is a particular favorite of mine!