

Grammar, Spelling & Punctuation

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Academics are often accused of being pedantic about grammar, spelling and punctuation, but all these seemingly endless rules are actually about effective communication – expressing yourself clearly, accurately and precisely.

It is true that language is dynamic, so conventional rules about grammar and punctuation change all the time. It is also true that experts often disagree amongst themselves about correct spelling and punctuation. The fact is that there are different conventions about some things, and some academics will tell you one thing, and others will tell you something completely different....

Many of the errors found in student assignments are usually straightforward, however. Students may be criticised, or even lose marks, because they have neglected some basic rules. Effective academic writing requires good grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

1.0 **Grammar**

1.1 **Sentences**

The **sentence** is the basic unit of academic writing. This may seem obvious, but in informal spoken English, people often use incomplete sentences. Sentences in essays and assignments must always be complete.

Complete sentence: The doctor saw the patient.

Incomplete sentence: Seeing the patient.

'Seeing the patient' is a **sentence fragment**. These are extremely common in spoken English, so they *sound* okay. But watch out for sentence fragments in formal written academic assignments.

A complete sentence is a complete thought and always has (at least) two components: a **subject** and a **predicate**. The subject is the person or thing at the centre of attention; the predicate tells the reader something about the subject:

The doctor	saw the patient.
subject	predicate

Often, though not always, the predicate can be further divided into a **verb** and an **object**. The **verb** is the 'doing or being' word, and describes the action. The **object** (if there is one) tells you who is on the receiving end:

The doctor	saw	the patient.
subject	verb	object

This may not be a very interesting sentence but it is a complete sentence.

Sentences in academic books and journals can be quite complex, made up of one or more **subordinate clauses** joined in various ways, including **conjunctions** or **relative pronouns** or linked through punctuation (please see below for more on each of these topics). The basic rule remains the same, however: one complete idea, one complete sentence.

1.2 **Paragraphs**

A **paragraph** is a collection of two or more sentences developing a *single* topic, theme, or idea. All the sentences in a paragraph should thus be related in some way, and tell the reader something more about the key idea. So a complete paragraph would be something like:

The doctor saw the patient. The patient came into the surgery looking extremely anxious, so the doctor spoke quietly and tried to put the patient at ease. The patient sat down. For a brief moment, there was a heavy silence in the room.

This paragraph tells the reader something more about the key topic: the doctor saw the patient.

In fact, the expectation that all the sentences in a paragraph are related is so strong that readers will often force a connection, even if there isn't one!

This is a collection of two or more sentences, but they are not obviously

connected. Even so, many readers will still look for a link!

One of the problems is that it is becoming increasingly common to use bullet points to string a whole number of different issues together without developing the links. In formal academic writing, almost every 'bullet point' will need a full paragraph to develop and explain the idea.

1.3 Syntax

Syntax is the technical term for the rules governing the way words in any language are put together into sentences. Syntax is particularly important in English, where a small change in word order can completely change the meaning of the sentence. For example:

'The doctor saw the patient' *is different from* 'The patient saw the doctor'

Same words, different order, and very different meaning (Incidentally, this is another example of an incomplete sentence!)

Syntax is about paying attention to word order (and therefore sentence-meaning). This can be particularly difficult for people who use English as a second language – partly because most speakers of any language usually learn basic syntax as they grow up surrounded by the language, and partly because other languages have other ways of indicating meaning. Word order in ancient Greek, for example, was largely irrelevant – other aspects of grammar made the meaning perfectly clear. This is not the case in English. Word order is absolutely crucial for clarity, accuracy and meaning.

The rules of syntax are notoriously complex in English, but please be careful. Make sure your sentences make sense, and that they mean what you want them to mean.

Things to avoid in Sentences

Avoid beginning sentences with certain linking words, for example, 'which', 'while/whilst', 'whereas', 'although', as well as 'and' or 'but'.

Be careful when giving examples in your writing. The words 'For example' should begin a sentence only when a **main verb** follows. This is shown in the two examples below:

Example 1. Communication skills can be improved in different ways.
For example, role-play **provides** a means of doing this.

Example 2. Communication skills can be improved in different ways.
For example, through role-play.

In Example 1, the sentence begins with 'For example....' because the verb 'to provide' follows. In Example 2, there is no following main verb, so the 'for example' needs to be linked to the previous text by a **comma** not a **full stop**:

Example 2. Communication skills can be improved in different ways,
for example, through role-play.

1.4 Nouns

Nouns are labelling words – they name people, animals, places and concepts

etc. They can be **singular** or **plural**, such as science/sciences, or theatre/theatres.

Nouns play an important part in the sentence because they tend to be the **key elements**. For example:

The **students** handed in their **essays**, which were marked by the **tutor**.

The three **nouns** in this sentence (in bold) tell the reader who and what is involved in the action.

Sometimes nouns are preceded the **indefinite article** ('a' or 'an') or the **definite article** ('the'). The presence or absence of an article can change the meaning of a sentence – for example:

An athlete is needed for the race.

The athlete is needed for the race.

Note the difference in meaning – the first sentence is generic, and implies any athlete is needed, whereas the second implies one particular person.

English uses the definite or indefinite article a lot – more than in many other languages. For example:

'Students are an asset to modern society' is good English.

'Mechanic repairs car' is not. It should be '**The** mechanic repairs **the** car'.

1.5 Pronouns

Pronouns are words used to replace nouns. Common pronouns are: **I, me, you, he, him, her, they, them, mine, yours, his, hers** and **theirs**. One of their functions is to save repeating nouns (which gets boring...). For example:

"The student gave me **his** book", not "The student gave me **the student's** book."

"That pen belongs to Sara. It is **hers**", not "That pen belongs to Sara. It is **Sara's**."

Be careful with pronouns. It **must** be clear which noun is being replaced by the pronoun (technically known as the *antecedent*). Lack of clarity can lead to confusion - for example:

In former times, psychology attempted to imitate the natural sciences, such as physics. It used empirical methods to claim scientific reliability.

Which is the *antecedent* in the second sentence? Does "it" refer to psychology or physics? Presumably, it is psychology - but we could be wrong!

1.3 Adjectives

An **adjective** is a *describing* word – it tells you more about a **noun**. It often goes *before* the noun it describes, but it can stand alone after a verb. For example:

They have **interesting** jobs.

Their jobs are **interesting**.

Examinations are **challenging**.

One way to think of adjectives is that they add detail to the noun. So, in the second example: what type of jobs are they? **Interesting** ones!

1.4 Verbs

A **verb** is a word used for actions or states of being. For example:

They **are writing**. (action)

He **went** out. (action)

I **will be** ready soon. (action)

They **are** early. (state)

She **got** wet. (state)

Remember, in formal academic English, **a sentence must have a finite verb** with a subject (I, you, s/he, we, or they) to make sense. A finite verb has **tense** - that is, it is past, present or future. So these are complete sentences:

I ran for the bus. (**Past**)

You run for the bus. (**Present**)

They will run for the bus. (**Future**)

But these are not:

Love cheese.

Enjoying the film?

During the shopping trip, nothing.

Sometimes English makes use of an *auxiliary verb* to convey meaning. So, for example:

‘Shelley **has** fun’ (simple present, only one verb: has)

‘Shelley **is having** fun’ (present continuous, using two verbs: is, having)

Shelley **paid** the bill (simple past)

Shelley **was paying** the bill (past continuous or *imperfect* with two verbs)

Verbs can also be **active** or **passive**:

Active means that the *subject* does the action

Passive means that the action *is done to the subject*

For example:

‘The lorry sweeps the road’ is active

This is because ‘the lorry’ is the **subject** of the sentence AND the lorry does the action (sweeps the road)

‘The lorry was washed’ is passive

'The lorry' is still the **subject** in this sentence, but in this case the action of the verb (washing) is *done* to the subject – so it is passive

Fashions – even in academic writing! – are changing. Traditionally, academic English tended to use the passive form frequently (mostly because it was felt to give a certain sense of detachment and objectivity). However, there are other ways of maintaining objectivity, and there is a marked swing these days towards greater use of the active.

ALWAYS make sure that the sentences in your essays make sense!

Split infinitives

It has been said that the most famous split infinitive in the English language comes from the title sequence in *Star Trek*: 'to boldly go...' It is also extremely common in 'computer-speak' – to quickly open, etc.

This is split because the infinitive in English is made up of two words which belong together – the verb, and the word 'to'. Technically, these should not be separated. So, Captain Kirk *should* have said 'to go boldly', keeping the two bits of the infinitive together ('to go').

Split infinitives were once regarded as a serious grammatical error, but opinion is rapidly changing, and it is no longer the serious offence it was once held to be.... Even so, it is probably better to avoid them.

1.5 Adverbs

Adverbs and adjectives are often confused. An adjective tells you more about the **noun**. An **adverb** tells you more about the **verb**.

An adverb describes **how**, **when**, or **where** something happened. For example:

They **strongly** agreed.

He is **usually** late.

She works **fast**.

They work **here**.

In English, many common adverbs take the form '**-ly**' – slowly, quickly, meaningfully, etc. In fact, you can often form adverbs by taking an adjective and sticking '**-ly**' on the end: so 'beautiful' (adjective) becomes 'beautifully' (adverb).

BUT be careful: this doesn't always work. In the sentences above, 'fast' and 'here' are independent forms.

Many common adverbs have independent forms. Notoriously, the adjective 'good' takes the adverb 'well'. So:

'The boy done good' is (doubly!) incorrect. It should be:

'The boy did well'.

Watch the difference between spoken and written English again. In spoken English, if someone is asked 'how are you?', it is increasingly common for them to answer 'I'm good, thank you'. Technically, this means 'I am a good (person)', because 'good' is an adjective not an adverb. The grammatically

correct answer is 'I am well, thank you'.

1.6 Prepositions

A **preposition** shows the relationship between one word and another. For instance, it can provide information about time and place. For example:

The book is **on** the table, not **in** my bag.

Please arrive **before** nine or **after** eleven.

Also, some prepositions simply go with certain words, such as:

result **in**

keen **on**

impatient **with**

Common prepositions are: **in, on, at, for, under, over, from, to, into, with, before, after, around, near, past, opposite** and **between**.

1.7 Sentence Endings

The term **hanging preposition** is often used to describe prepositions placed at the end of a sentence or phrase, and separated from the word(s) to which they refer. For example:

I liked the company **which/that** I was working **for**.

She was inspired by the scientists **whom/that** she worked **with**.

I don't know about the theory **which/that** he is referring **to**.

(In these examples it is better to use **which/whom** rather than **that**).

Although the use of 'hanging prepositions' may be acceptable in less formal writing, in academic writing or formal documents (such as a CV), they should be avoided.

You should try and make sure that you do not end sentences with '**with**' or '**for**', or any other 'hanging preposition'.

In most cases, you will have to rearrange the order of the words in the sentence so as to avoid the 'hanging preposition'.

So, the sentences above might be rewritten:

I liked the company **for which** I was working.

She was inspired by the scientists **with whom** she worked.

I don't know about the theory **to which** she is referring.

Check essays and formal writing carefully and use these alternative constructions to avoid hanging prepositions.

1.8 Conjunctions

Conjunctions are linking words which join groups of words and sentences. If you do not use enough of them, your sentences will seem abrupt. Here are some examples of conjunctions:

He felt motivated **because** his results had improved.

I was tired **but** I continued to work **and** I started to make mistakes.

Due to the fact that the weather is worsening, classes will finish earlier.

However, lessons will resume tomorrow.

Notice that in the first two sentences, the conjunction links two ideas in a particular relationship. In the third sentence, the same is true, but the conjunction is at the beginning of the sentence. In the last sentence, “however” links with the previous sentence.

Conjunctions can thus link both *within* and *between* sentences.

1.9 Subordinate Clauses

Subordinate clauses are another – slightly more sophisticated! – way of joining two ideas or pieces of information together. Subordinate clauses often use **relative pronouns** to link the two ideas. Take, for example, these two short sentences:

The lecturer marked the essay. The essay was very long.

These sentences do the job – they give the reader the relevant information. However, although sentences like this can sometimes be effective, they get very boring if used too often, and also make essays feel ‘bitty’ and disjointed. A better way of conveying the same information, therefore, might be to say:

The lecturer marked the essay, which was very long.

Which is a relative pronoun. Other commonly used relative pronouns include: **who**, **whom**, **whose**, **that** and so on.

The bit following the relative pronoun is called the subordinate clause – in this case, the subordinate clause is: *which was very long*.

The grammatical rules for using relative pronouns can get complicated, especially when the ideas being joined relate to people rather than things. So:

The lecturer congratulated the student. The lecturer was a kind and thoughtful person.

This can be joined using the relative pronoun **who**:

The lecturer, who was a kind and thoughtful person, congratulated the student.

BUT be careful! Consider the following two sentences:

The student was pleased. The lecturer congratulated the student.

In this case, the relative pronoun is **whom** rather than **who**:

The student, whom the lecturer congratulated, was pleased.

The basic rule is that you use **who** when the person concerned is the **subject** of the **subordinate clause** and **whom** when the person is the **object** of the **subordinate clause**. Note that the important point is the **subordinate clause**. In these two sentences, the student is the **subject** of the main sentence, but the **object** of the subordinate clause:

Sentence 1: The student was pleased.

Sentence 2: The lecturer (subject) congratulated the student (object).

2.0 Spelling

Spelling is important for exactly the same reason that grammar and punctuation are important: poor spelling makes for poor communication. Academic writing requires a high degree of accuracy, and this is reflected in the quality of the writing. Sloppy spelling gives the impression that you don't care about the assignment...

English spelling is notoriously whimsical and inconsistent. Spelling conventions have grown up over centuries as the result of the mixing of different languages (French, German, Latin, etc.) as well as different social fashions (for example, many of the differences between spelling in British English and American English can be traced to different social fashion).

Rule One: use a dictionary or the spell-check built into most Word Processors.

Rule Two: use a dictionary or the spell-check built into most Word Processors.

Rule Three...

2.1 Words to watch

To and **too**

To is used with the infinitive (*to* watch, *to* run, etc.) or with an indirect object (I gave the book *to* the student) or as a preposition (The Manager ran *to* the Fire Exit)

Too is an adverb – it adds information to a verb: 'that athlete was *too* slow *to* win the race'. In addition, it can be used in the sense of *also*: 'The teacher, *too*, was puzzled by this suggestion'.

Their, there and **they're**

Their is a possessive form (something belonging to 'them')

There is an adverb, indicating location (over there)

They're is a contraction of 'they are'

It's and **its**

It's is a contraction of 'it is'

Its is a possessive pronoun (it belongs to it: its properties, etc.)

Accept and **except**

Accept is a verb, meaning to receive something (I accept that gift, they accepted this idea)

Except can be a verb, except it is often used as a preposition meaning 'but' (I would accept that idea, except it is wrong....)

Affect and **effect**

Affect is a verb meaning to influence (Holiday arrangements have been badly affected by the weather conditions)

Effect is the outcome of a chain of events (cause and effect)

Separate not **seperate**

occasional not **ocassional**

incidentally not **incidently**

Desperate not **desparate**

definitely not **definitaly**

dependence not **dependance**

2.2 Some Odd Spelling Rules

What to do with 'e'

There are exceptions to all the rules about 'e' – including the classic “i” before ‘e’, except after ‘c’” (e.g. weird, science, etc.). There are a few useful general tips, however:

Dropping the 'e'

Words ending in 'e' often lose the 'e' when a suffix (the ending which is added to a word) begins with a vowel or when a 'y' is added. For example:

desire + able	= desirable
criticise + ing	= criticising
advise + ory	= advisory
educate + ion	= education
arrive + al	= arrival
close + ure	= closure
noise + y	= noisy

Keeping the 'e'

Inevitably, there are exceptions to this general rule, and the 'e' is kept. For example:

like + able	= likeable
stripe + y	= stripey

The 'e' is also kept when the suffix begins with a consonant, as in -ness, -ly, -ment, -ful, -less etc. For example:

sincere + ly	= sincerely
late + ly	= lately
polite + ness	= politeness
place + ment	= placement
complete + ly	= completely
blame + less	= blameless

But (of course!), there are also exceptions to this rule. In some cases, the 'e' is dropped before the consonantal suffix. For example:

argue + ment	= argument
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wise + dom	= wisdom
true + th	= truth
true + ly	= truly
nine + th	= ninth

3. **Punctuation**

Punctuation is simply about a series of conventions that make it easier for readers to follow your train of thought. A complete sentence (one thought or idea) is indicated by a **full stop** (.). A pause in the flow of thought, for example, to allow additional information, is indicated by a **comma** (,). A **semi-colon** (;) is used to indicate a fuller pause than a comma, but not the final end of the sentence. A **colon** (:) is used to indicate the beginning of a list.

3.1 **Full Stops**

Full stops are used to divide text and create boundaries **by marking the end of a sentence**.

- Make sure that your full stops *look* like full stops and that they are distinct from commas.
- Make sure that the letter following a full stop is always a capital letter and looks like one.
- Remember, feedback from your lecturers that points out that there are too many commas in your writing may well mean that your commas are doing the wrong job. After you have completed one sequence of thought, indicate this with a full stop. Then move on to the next one.

3.2 **Commas**

Commas are used to divide up groups of words *within* a sentence. They are extremely important and help to keep units of writing together. This helps to clarify understanding and avoids frustrating the reader.

The main function of the comma is to:

- Break up parts of longer sentences - for example:

After the main points had been presented, the students were asked for their comments.

(N.B. The comma in this example neatly divides the meaning into two parts. If there were no comma, the reader would read, “presented the students....” As a word group, and this would not make sense without re-reading for clarification.)

There would, however, be no comma in the following sentence:

They decided to go to the library and find further information about the topic of the essay.

In this case, a pair of ideas is linked by the word ‘and’, no pausing occurs in

speech, and no punctuation (i.e. comma) is needed to clarify the meaning.

- Present items in a list. For example:

I would like to watch the video, take notes and then be ready to ask questions.

- Divide words which refer to the subject of a sentence. For example:

The President of the Society, Julie Jones, received a standing ovation after her speech.

- Punctuate certain relative clauses (i.e. parts of a sentence beginning with 'who', 'which', or 'whose'). For example:

The College, which is situated in the centre of Canterbury, has an excellent academic reputation.

In this example, the part of the sentence between the commas is designed to add extra information to the statement about the college.

A comma is not always used with words like 'who' or 'which'. Consider the following example:

I like lecturers who give high grades for my work.

In this example the meaning is derived from linking up the 'lecturers' and 'who give high grades...', not from separating out these two parts of the sentence. Try reading this sentence with a comma (pause) before the word 'who'. Does the sentence make sense with this comma?

Some words or phrases (in traditional grammar, at least!) *expect* a comma after they have been used: e.g. However, nevertheless, for example, etc..

3.3 Colons and Semi-Colons

Colons should be used only:

- To introduce a **list**. For example:

An essay usually includes the following components: an introduction, a main body of text and a conclusion.

- To show a **link** between the units of meaning, like a hinge. For example:

The results of the referendum were very clear: there was a need for a change in policy.

Semi-colons are extremely useful in long sentences, but be careful not to over-use them. They are typically used as follows:

In the library there were several students reading journal articles; a couple of lecturers checking the stock, and a librarian returning books to the shelves.

- To provide a break in a sentence, while showing the relationship between the two parts. For example:

Night was falling; he knew all was lost.

- To express an idea which is too short to merit a new sentence. For example:

Wherever possible, students should try to organise their academic work by using ‘planning tools’; these can help to clarify ideas.

In some cases semi-colons are followed by linking words, as in:

They were unsure about the outcome of the assignment they were about to undertake; nevertheless, they would try their best.

The semi-colon can be a powerful tool in helping you to organise your writing, and present your ideas clearly and meaningfully. However, it will lose its effectiveness if over-used. Think carefully about how you will use it and remember to use it sparingly.

3.4 Apostrophes

Incorrect use of the apostrophe in students' writing is a very common mistake, and very irritating! Apostrophes should be used:

- When letters have been left out of a word. For example:

The library's still open. (meaning "The library **is** still open.")

It won't be necessary. (meaning "It **will not** be necessary.")

- To show possession (belonging to). For example:

Einstein's theory (meaning "The theory of Einstein")

When you are using an apostrophe to show possession, then the position of the apostrophe depends on whether you have a *singular* or *plural* noun to denote the possessor.

In these examples, the apostrophe is attached to a *singular noun*:

That pen is **Simon's**.

Jasmine's examination papers

In these cases, *apostrophe 's'* is added after the noun to show possession. This is the correct position for a *singular noun*.

(Note: there is no apostrophe in the word "papers" above - this is because this is a simple plural- there are no letters missing and no possession is shown!)

If the relevant *noun* is in the plural, the apostrophe is placed *after* the 's':

The students' belongings ...

Psychologists' theories have suggested ...

Exceptions:

- Some words have unusual plural forms, such as children (plural of child), women (plural of woman). In these cases, because the plural is different from the singular, the apostrophe goes in the singular position, *before* the 's'. For example:

The children's party ... (*not* childrens'....)

The women's meeting ...(*not* womens'...)

- The really confusing exception is **it**....

It only takes an apostrophe *to show a missing letter*. For example:

It's a shame (meaning "It is a shame.").

The possessive form of 'it' is 'its' NOT 'it's'. The possessive of 'it' DOES NOT need an apostrophe....

The company was falsely accused of maladministration. Its response was to threaten to sue.

Even though this looks as if the 'it' should have an apostrophe (because 'it' refers to the response that 'belongs' to the company), don't do it! The simple rule is to only use an apostrophe with *it* when it means *it is*.

This is true for all possessive pronouns: ***yours, hers, ours, theirs.***