

Essential Student Skills: The tools of writing

Academic writing is about **how** you write as well as what you write. Correct grammar and punctuation are essential building blocks of good academic writing.

The following pages contain information about key aspects of grammar and punctuation. You may wish to return to these pages when you come to your next piece of academic writing.

Grammar

Grammar is a set of rules regarding the presentation of words and the way in which they are put together to form sentences.



The word grammar is derived from the Greek *grammatikē*, literally, the 'art of words'.

"Do not write so that you can be understood, write so that you cannot be misunderstood."

Attributed to Epictetus, Greek philosopher

Common mistakes in written work include:

- Bad syntax** Syntax describes the sentence structure. A badly ordered sentence can quickly confuse the reader. Think about key words and phrases, and the best way to order them to make the meaning clear.
- Inappropriate use of tense** Be consistent with your use of tense; do not use a mixture - for example 'The lecturer displayed... (past) and demonstrates... (present) - of tenses in the same sentence.
When introducing and discussing the work or ideas of others, it is good practice to write in the present tense: 'Smith believes.. and identifies'.
- Incorrect use of prepositions** Prepositions describe the position and movement of nouns (persons or things) and are often misused, particularly in speech, but be particularly careful with your writing. The word 'of' is often used, incorrectly, where 'have' would be the appropriate preposition: '..and seems to of discovered...' should be '..seems to have discovered...'
- Confusing singular and plural** Nouns (persons or things) are singular (e.g. a group, book) or plural (groups, books); ensure you match the correct verb forms with your nouns. For example the book is interesting, the books are interesting. Be particularly careful with collective nouns (which indicate a grouping), for example 'The jury is deliberating....' rather than 'The jury are deliberating'.
- Excessively long sentences** Aim to keep sentences fairly short; very long sentences, extended with lots of commas, can cause confusion to the reader.

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Using 'and' instead of 'to'

'I will try and write', should be written 'I will try to write'; to try' is an infinitive verb (i.e. a 'to' verb) which requires an additional verb, in this example 'write' to qualify it. Using 'and' indicates two different actions: I will try, I will write, rather than the one action of trying to write.

Nouns

A noun is the name of a person, thing or quality.



Elizabeth



strength



Earth



idea

Which of these is **not a noun**?

- planet
- windy
- sunshine
- rain

[The correct answer is windy, which is an adjective].

Adjectives

An adjective **describes or qualifies a noun**.

- a **black** cat
- a **large** book
- the women is **intelligent**
- he is **tired**

Example:

It is a windy day (windy is an adjective) (day is a noun).

Pronouns

A **pronoun** is used **in place of a noun** - usually to avoid having to repeat it.

- he
- she
- it
- you
- me
- they

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Example:

Jessie is a lovely dog. Jessie is so well behaved.

Pronoun: Jessie is a lovely dog; she is so well behaved (she is a pronoun)

Verbs

A verb is a word, or group of words, that expresses an action.

- he **reads**,
- she **drives**,
- they **study**,
- we **run**

or expresses states of being:

- I **am**,
- he **is**,
- you **are**,
- we **will**,
- they **might**.

Auxiliary verbs

Consider:

I telephone you

I **will** telephone you

and

She going on holiday

She **is** going on holiday

In English, we have helper, or auxiliary verbs to convey when the action or feeling is taking place, that is, the tense of the verb.

These auxiliary verbs which help form the tense of the verb, and show when the action or feeling is taking place, are usually from one of the verbs:

- **To be:** I am / she is / they are going to Paris.
- **To have:** She has / she will have packed her case.
- **To do:** We do / I did feel envious.

The **to** form of the word is called the **infinitive** (without time or tense).

You can usually add 'n't' to most of the **auxiliary** verbs, for example:

- He didn't walk to work.

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Didn't is a conversational form of did not where the two words are run together, and the apostrophe marks the missing 'o'.

Tip: In academic writing, these words should be written out in full.

Verbs and tenses

The tense of the verb in a sentence shows the time when an action takes place:

- He will deliver his speech tomorrow. (future tense)
- He delivered his speech yesterday. (past tense)

The tense can be shown by the use of more than one verb or more than one 'auxiliary' verb (e.g. will, have):

- She will be arriving.
- They had been talking.
- We could have gone.
- I should be helping.

Verbs are either regular or irregular.

A regular verb takes a regular set of endings when you change its tense or subject; whereas an irregular verb does not:

Regular:

- I walk
- I walked
- I play
- I played
- They played
- She talked

Irregular:

- I am
- I was
- I run
- I ran
- They are
- They were

Be aware of tense when writing and be careful not to drift from one tense to another.

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He opened the cupboard and the books fall out. (This is incorrect, opened is present tense and fall is past tense - you must not mix the tenses within a sentence).

This should be written:

He opened the cupboard and the books fell out. Or,

He opens the cupboard and the books fall out.

There are many different ways of expressing things which have already happened.

Verbs and subjects

The verb should always agree with the subject, that is the person or thing the verb relates to.

For example, think about swans on a lake and the verb, to glide:

In the present tense (now) an s is added to most verbs when the subject is he, she or it.

- The swan glides across the water.

But we glides or they glides would be incorrect as the subject and verb would not agree.

- The swans glide across the water.

The verb, To be:

- I am
- you are
- he is
- we are
- they are

The swans are gliding across the water.

The swan is gliding across the water.

Consider the following sentences: which forms of the highlighted verbs are correct?

1. The department **is/are** holding a meeting.
2. There **is/are** too many people in the hall.
3. A car and a lorry **was/were** involved in the accident.

Reveal:

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Answers

1. The subject is department, and although lots of people work there, department is singular, so the correct form is 'The department **is**...'
2. The subject is people, which is the plural form of person. There are two subjects, car and lorry, so we use the 'they' form of the verb, so the correct form is 'There **are** too many...'
3. The subjects are the car and the lorry, which combine to make a plural, so the correct form is 'A car and a lorry **were**...'

Double subjects

Where the subject of a sentence is made up of two or more separate subjects, the verb is generally used in the plural form:

The cows, pigs and other animals are all well fed.

Sometimes it seems hard to decide if the subject is singular or plural especially when the word before the verb seems to show a plural subject:

The bag of apples was heavy.

The bag is the subject and although it contains lots of apples, there is only one bag, so the correct form is was, not were.

Collective nouns and verbs

Some nouns name a group (a flock, a herd, a family). These are called collective nouns. When the group is considered as a single unit, these nouns use the singular form of the verb: The herd rushes into the field.

The whole family is in agreement.

However when, for example, the family being described is made up of separate members, each with a different view, the plural verb is used:

My family have very different views on life.

Prepositions

The word preposition means 'place before' and usually introduces a phrase containing a noun or pronoun.

Examples:

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for, above, on, at, between, until, after, without, against, along, underneath, off, near, across, since, with, before, of.

Prepositions often show the relationship (usually involving a time or place) between the noun or pronoun they precede and another word in the sentence:

- I will book a table **for** 6.30.
- We will meet **at** the restaurant.

Sometimes more than one preposition will be used:

- The restaurant is **next to** the station.

Improve your writing (and reduce your word count) by removing unnecessary prepositions:

- The book fell **off of** the shelf. The word '**of**' is not required.

Avoid ending a sentence with a preposition:

- I have the ingredients to make it **with**.

This is better:

- I have the ingredients **with which** to make it.

Read through your work to ensure you have used the appropriate prepositions:

- She was ashamed **with** her behaviour.

This should read:

- She was ashamed **of** her behaviour.

In speech and informal language we often use verbs as part of phrases, with prepositions; however in formal writing, single verbs should be used where possible.

- The group **looked at** the options to **work out** how to solve this.

The group examined the options to establish a solution.

Use the following single verbs to replace the verb phrases in the sentences shown:

investigate, increased, established, discussed

1. Expenditure has gone up dramatically.

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2. This issue was brought up at a previous meeting.
3. The group was set up last year to look into this issue.

Reveal:

Answers:

1. Expenditure has increased dramatically.
2. This issue was discussed at a previous meeting.
3. The group was established last year to investigate this issue.

Conjunctions

Conjunctions are words which link sentences, or groups of words, together.

Such as:

He was small **and** stealthy

I like fish **and** chips, **but** I don't like pickled eggs.

Jenny was very tired, **yet** she pushed herself to finish her essay.

Conjunctions allow you to form intricate sentences and avoid having to use multiple short sentences instead.



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Getting a little further into conjunctions you will find that there are three types:

Coordinating conjunctions

Coordinating conjunctions allow you to join words, phrases, and clauses of equal grammatical rank in a sentence. The most common coordinating conjunctions are **for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so**.

Correlative conjunctions

Correlative conjunctions are pairs of conjunctions that work together. Some examples are *either/or, neither/nor, and not only/but also*.

Subordinating conjunctions

Subordinating conjunctions join independent and dependent clauses. A subordinating conjunction can signal a cause-and-effect relationship, a contrast, or some other kind of relationship between the clauses. Common subordinating conjunctions are *because, since, as, although, though, while, and whereas*. Sometimes an adverb, such as *until, after, or before* can function as a conjunction.

([Grammarly](#) 2022)

Capital letters

You should capitalise the first letter of:

- **A new sentence.**
- **The names of a person, including any title:** Mr Hugh Grant, Sir Terry Wogan, Dr Who, Father Christmas
- **The days of the week and months of the year:** Wednesday, August
- **Place names:** Baker Street, Glasgow, New York, River Thames, Edinburgh Castle
- **Names of businesses and organisations, including abbreviated forms:** British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC, European Union
- **Events and named days or holidays:** Christmas Day, Trooping of the Color, Easter*
- **Words in a title and headings in a document:** Sound of Music, The Great Escape, Breakfast at Tiffanys*



Note: Small connecting words (such as and, or, the) are not capitalised.

Task:

Read through the paragraph below and decide which letters should be capitalised.
central park in new york is a vast area set aside for recreation in the centre of manhattan. the park boasts 843 acres of landscaped grounds, including several man made lakes and ponds, and is located between 110th street in the north, 59th street to the south, fifth avenue to the east and central park west in the west.

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Answer

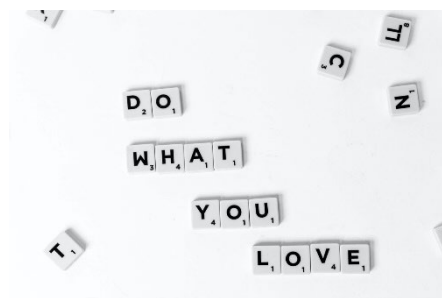
Central Park in New York is a vast area set aside for recreation in the centre of Manhattan. The park boasts 843 acres of landscaped grounds, including several man made lakes and ponds, and is located between 110th Street in the north, 59th Street to the south, Fifth Avenue to the east and Central Park West in the west.

How did you do?

Sentences

A sentence:

- is a group of words which makes sense on its own:
Tom lives in Inverness.
- begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop (.), question mark (?) or exclamation mark (!).
- must have a subject (a noun or pronoun, ie. the person or thing that the sentence is about), and a verb (which describes what the subject is doing or being):
Tom (noun) lives (verb) in Inverness.



There are four main types of sentence:

- 1) A statement that expresses a fact or opinion and ends with a full-stop(.).**
 - a) The shopping centre is open until 8pm on Thursdays. (fact)
 - b) I think the shopping centre is too busy on Thursdays. (opinion)
- 2) A question that is used to request information or pose a proposition and ends with a question mark(?).**
 - a) What time does the shopping centre close today?
- 3) A command that issues an instruction and ends with a full stop(.).**
 - a) Stir in 25 grams of sultanas. (recipe)
 - b) Do not walk on the grass. (notice in a park)
- 4) An exclamation that expresses strong feeling or surprise and ends with an explanation mark(!).**
 - a) What a beautiful view!

Good sentence structure is the key to clear expression. When the meaning of a piece of writing is unclear, it is often because it is not written in proper sentences.

Some of the main faults in sentence construction are:

- omission of or inaccurate use of punctuation, especially capital letters and full-stops;
- omission of or incomplete use of verbs;
- inappropriate word order;
- sentences that are too long, with too many ideas crammed together.

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The basic advice is to:

- write in short simple sentences; but not so short that they sound stilted, and to
- avoid very long sentences; these may cause the reader to lose track of what you are trying to put across.

Tip: Often a good way of seeing if a sentence sounds right is to read it out loud.

Paragraphs

Paragraphs are clusters of sentences about the same topic.

Within each paragraph, there should be **one main idea**, which should appear in the topic (or 'signpost') sentence. This should come at or near the start of the paragraph.

The other sentences in the paragraph should **expand on this idea**, either by developing the argument or providing illustrations. Each new main idea should form the basis of a new paragraph. Paragraphs can be linked by transitional words or phrases such as 'however', 'on the other hand', 'conversely', 'in conclusion'. These are often referred to as 'linking words'.



Punctuation

Punctuating your written work well assists the reader to make sense of your writing. There are conventions you should follow, such as capitalising the first letter of a sentence and ending each with a full stop, which will make the relationship between words clear. Features of speech can be incorporated through the use of commas and semi colons, to indicate a pause, for example, and question marks and exclamation marks to indicate a change of pitch and tone.



Incorrect use of punctuation can change the meaning of what you have written, or at least cause some confusion to the reader.

Common mistakes in written work include (click headings for more detail):

Incorrect use of colons and semi-colons

Although they look alike, colons and semi-colons perform different functions with a sentence. Semi-colons are used to connect two related sentences whereas colons are used to join a statement and a related explanation, example or instruction.

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Incorrect use of apostrophes

Misplaced apostrophes can change the meaning of a sentence. For example, the learner's classroom refers to the classroom used by a single learner, whereas the learners' classroom refers to the classroom used by a number of learners.

Incorrect use of commas

Commas insert natural pauses in a sentence, and if misplaced can confuse the reader. Excessive use of commas to build over long sentences can cause the reader to lose track.

Incorrect use of capital letters

Capital letters should be used at the start of a new sentence and for 'proper' nouns only. For example, the Department of Computing should have initial capitals, however a reference to un-named departments (for example 'various departments with the building...') should not..

Incorrect use of speech marks

Speech marks are used to indicate when something is being said. If you are quoting from something which has been expressed in writing, this text should be surrounded by inverted commas ('..') rather than speech marks ("..").

The following pages will help you avoid some of the problems associated with incorrect punctuation.

Commas

A comma is used to allow a slight pause when reading a sentence and is a useful means of organising ideas within sentences.

Before I left the carpark, I checked my mirrors in case there was someone walking nearby.

Tips

- Try to avoid creating very long sentences with too many commas though, as this can confuse the reader.
- Sometimes, reading a sentence aloud provides a clue to where commas should be inserted.

When should you use a comma?

Use a comma to:

Separate items in a list:

- The new complex contains a swimming pool, cinema, gymnasium, climbing wall and a games room.

Separate descriptive words (adverbs or adjectives) where more than one is used:

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- It was a rainy, windy, miserable day.

Mark off additional information which is not essential to the meaning of a sentence:

- Amethyst, **which is purple in colour**, is a soft rock.

Create a pause after groups of words beginning with, for example, 'when', 'if', 'after', 'unless', 'although':

- If I leave now, I can catch the last train.

Also use a comma:

To create a pause after linking words such as 'however', 'on the contrary':

- However, there are other ways to tackle the problem.

Where there is an incomplete verb at the start of a sentence or phrase:

- Shaking his head, he walked away.
- Covered in mud, the dog was almost unrecognisable.

Task

Place commas into the appropriate places in the following sentences.

- The day after tomorrow I will be on holiday
- Finally I would like to thank the caterers.
- Listening to music she fell asleep.

Reveal

Answer

- The day after tomorrow, I will be on holiday.
- Finally, I would like to thank the caterers.
- Listening to music, she fell asleep.

Colons and semi-colons

It is perfectly acceptable to punctuate your written work using only commas and full-stops; however the use of **colons** (:) or **semi-colons** (;) can aid reading and understanding.

Colons are generally used to introduce:

Lists:

- Three countries occupy the main island of Great Britain: England, Scotland and Wales.

Explanations:

- This is an open book assignment: students are allowed access to notes and other resources.

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Quotations:

- As William Shakespeare penned in 'King John': 'Be great in act, as you have been in thought'.

Semi-colons are used:

To combine two ideas of equal importance or two related sentences, with a short pause between:

- You will find communication easy in the Netherlands; most people speak English very well.

For complex lists, where items are made up of several words or phrases:

- Central Park is bounded by four main thoroughfares: 110th Street in the north; 59th Street to the south; Fifth Avenue to the east; Central Park West to the west.

Apostrophes

An apostrophe (') can be used to indicate ownership or possession, or to replace missing letters when two words are run together.

The apostrophe (') is used to indicate ownership or possession:

- Shakespeare's plays are referenced extensively.
- The book's cover is worn.
- The government's education policy.

An apostrophe followed by the letter **s** is added to the name of a person or noun to indicate ownership.

Where the plural form of the noun ends with an **s**, the apostrophe should be placed after the **s**:

- The books' covers are worn.

Where the plural form does **not end in s**, an apostrophe followed by an **s** is added to indicate ownership:

- The people's choice.

Some Guidelines when indicating possession with names:

For an English name that ends with an **s**, you add 's:

- James's book
- Dickens's novels

For an English name with a final syllable that is pronounced 'iz' or 'ez' (as in Bridges), you only add an apostrophe:

- Bridges' play

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For the names of classical authors, and both classical and modern poets, (for example Euripides or Keats) you only add an apostrophe:

- Euripides' plays
- Keats' novels

Be particularly careful with its and it's:

Its - This is a word which indicates ownership but does not require an apostrophe.

- The dog stayed close to its master.
- The government increased its majority.

It's - Where in previous examples an apostrophe has indicated ownership, when used with the word it, the apostrophe marks the missing 'i' in it is.

It's confusing.

Remember: It's means it is.

An apostrophe takes the place of missing letters when two words are run together:

- I am waiting - I'm waiting.
- I cannot understand - I can't understand.
- Where is the station? - Where's the station?
- It is very important - It's very important.

These shortened versions are used in speech and in personal writing, but you should avoid using this form in academic writing, unless quoting speech.

One final note:

You should never use an apostrophe when you are simply changing a word or a number into a plural.

For example:

1980's **X** - this is an incorrect use of the apostrophe; it should be written as **1980s**.