Part 1 - grammar and punctuation

Once you have got your ideas in order, as described in ‘Getting reading to write’, you need to get down to writing. It’s important to express yourself as clearly and succinctly as possible, but this may not come naturally. Indeed, a recent report on writing standards of UK students showed that many had a poor vocabulary, used phrasing and punctuation inconsistently, and were generally unable to form well constructed sentences, let alone structure an argument.

In ‘Structuring written work’, we described how a good essay will develop an argument, which means ‘planning in some considerable detail how the essay will flow from one idea to the next; how different theories and arguments from different authors will be introduced; what conclusions will be reached; and how they will be supported by relevant evidence, or deductive reasoning’.

In order to do this, you need to be familiar with how to construct the basic building blocks of language, which means being able to write a grammatically correct sentence. You also need to learn how to develop a good, clear style, and use the paragraph effectively. We shall look at the former in this article and the latter in an article How to write more clearly (2) – Style.

Sentences

Are you conscious when you write that your sentences are awkward and clumsy, that you sometimes have difficulty in conveying what you mean to say? If so, you may be having difficulty with the basic rules of grammar.

In the UK, a whole generation missed out on learning the rules of grammar as educational theorists failed to perceive the link between grammar and the ability to communicate in writing. If this applies to you, don’t despair: a lot of people who write very well don’t know the rules of grammar but have absorbed them simply by being sensitive to language’s natural ‘rhythm’. Rather in the same way that you may know how to drive to the centre of your town, but you couldn’t say, for example, what manoeuvres you make and how you make them.

However, it’s useful to have an awareness of some of the key points of grammar, which we shall look at very briefly whilst giving you guidance on sources of further help.

Sentence structures – parts of a sentence

A sentence must consist of a subject and a verb. The verb is the word that indicates action, or doing, and the subject (noun) does the doing:

Subject: the dog
Verb: eats

Sometimes, there is an object (as well) – the recipient of the action:

Subject: the dog
Verb: eats
Object: his food

If there is another word that depends on the verb, but which also modifies the subject, this is known as the complement:

Subject: the dog
Verb: eats
Complement: hungrily
For more on this topic, see the resources below; the University of Ottawa’s Writing Centre is particularly helpful.

The above sentence structure is known as ‘simple’: it contains just one basic idea, about the dog’s hunger. However, we might want to add information, for example, that the dog was hungry because he had not been fed for three days, or that after eating he went for a walk. These are known as complex or compound sentences. You can spot them because they have more than one verb.

Complex and compound sentences are both sentences with more than one idea or set of information. They also contain more than one clause – a grammatical unit with a verb. In the following examples, there are two sets of subjects and two verbs:


**[The dog ate his food] and then [he went for a walk].**  
(Noted that we could omit the ‘he’, but its role in the sentence would still be ‘understood’.)

A compound sentence is one where two independent clauses are linked by a ‘joining’ word or conjunction such as for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.

A complex sentence is one where one clause is dependent on the other:


**[Because he had not been fed for three days], the [dog ate hungrily].**

If a clause relates back to a previous subject, it is known as a relative clause:


‘**The dog, whose bone I had taken, became aggressive.**’

Of course, a sentence can be both complex and compound (complex clause in {} and compound clause in []):


**{Even though you may not be required to publish}, a publication will always look good on your CV, [and also get you noticed with your peers].**

**Why might you wish to write a case study, [and what is it about case studies] {that makes them appealing subjects for publication for both academics and practitioners}?**

In actual fact, in academic writing, sentences will tend to be longer, and the complex-compound sentence will be very common.

Sometimes, a group of words is clearly linked e.g. ‘for a walk’ in ‘the dog ate his food and went for a walk’. Such groups of words, which are grammatically linked but which don’t have verbs, are called phrases.

Words can be divided into different classes according to their functions in the sentence. See below for definitions for the main ones.

**Different word classes – parts of speech**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Noun</strong></td>
<td>The name of something or someone – people, place (proper noun), thing, or concept (abstract noun)</td>
<td>Margaret, London, book, journal, dog, house, beauty, marketing, accounting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The verb is far and away the most important part of speech. It can:

- have different tenses, which tell you whether it is referring to the past, present or future
- be either passive (the Bill was passed) or active (Parliament passed the Bill). The former indicates being the recipient of action, while the latter performs the action. Use of the passive has a direct impact on style - see ‘Writing concisely’ in How to write more clearly (2) – Style
- be either transitive (with an object, e.g. ‘The dog eats his food’) or intransitive (without an object e.g. ‘The dog sleeps’)
- be made up of groups of words, e.g. ‘had been fed’, ‘will look’, ‘be required to publish’.

Punctuation indicates the rhythm of speech – the pauses and their significance. Its correct use will add a lot to your ability to write clearly.

The following is a brief summary of the main punctuation marks and their functions.

**Punctuation**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Mark</th>
<th>Function</th>
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</table>
Ends a sentence

Full-stop/period .

Indicates that an abbreviation has been used

Separates out clauses or phrases

Comma ,

Separates out elements in a list

Separates out two adjectives which precede a noun

Introduces a list

Colon :

Introduces a long quotation

Separates two clauses, of which one is the consequence, or a modification, of the other.

Semi colon ;

Separates two balanced and connected phrases

Question mark ?

Indicates a question

Exclamation mark !

Indicates emphasis or surprise

Apostrophe'

Shows possession

Showing missing letters

Quotation marks " " , " ,

Shows that something is quoted material. Use single quotes for something that is quoted within a quote.

The questions this paper addresses, therefore, are "What are the understandings that are ‘wired into’ the practices of those who participate in school governance?"

Ellipsis ...

Shows that words are missing, especially from a quote

Shows that material is secondary, less important

Parentheses () [ ]

For references in the Harvard reference system

Square parentheses show that words included in a quote were not in the original but have been inserted to make sense.

Board Chair: "Not following it up ... all she [the Board Chair] needed to do was ring the principal and say, [the parent] mentioned to me yesterday..."

Slash /

Shows alternatives.

He/she (commonly used to avoid the masculine pronoun used in a general sense).

Yin lists six different types of structure:

You will probably want to organize material into subheadings within the main sections: subheadings help you develop the logical flow of your material, and also act as sign posts to your reader.

By this stage you will know what your main sections are; the next task is to structure your material within the major sections.

Brands originally functioned to identify and differentiate products (Keller, 1998).

A beautiful, unspoilt view

The author’s book

Can’t, won’t

"The author's book"
Sources of further help
Grammar is a complex subject and we have only been able to scratch the surface here. You would be well advised to get hold of a decent grammar or guide to English usage, and there is also plenty of help on the Web.

Books

**Practical English Usage, 3rd Edition**  
Michael Swan (Oxford University Press, 2005)

**Oxford A-Z of Grammar and Punctuation**  
John Seely (Oxford University Press, 2004)

Websites

The following are a few recommendations. As with books, it’s partly down to personal preference, e.g. whether you prefer a structure based on theme, or an alphabetical one, or whether you respond to information presented visually.

**Guide to grammar and writing**  
Useful definitions and quite visual.

**Hypergrammar**  
Compiled by the University of Ottawa’s writing centre, very clear, and organized according to theme.

**Jack Lynch Guide to Grammar and Style**  
Well set out with alphabetical organization, easy to check common 'difficult words' e.g. is it alot or a lot?

**Internet Grammar of English**  
Written for undergraduates by the English Department of University College London, goes into quite a lot of detail, also a rather complex navigational structure dependent on javascript.

**Online Writing Lab (OWL)**  
A very useful site, well organized, with clear information.

From the University of Hertfordshire. Has excellent sections on punctuation and spelling.