



# **WRITING**

# **The Basics**

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## INTRODUCTION

Students to-day just dunno how to write proper. Fact!! Government says so, and employers. Which is why its hard getting that job you want - or even getting good marks in coursework to get the interview to get at the good job, cos your CD - sorry thats CV - is rubbish. All over the shop!  
STOP!

Let's face it, would you pay much attention to this booklet if it was written in the above manner? Whether you agree or not with claims about declining standards in English, it's a good idea to make sure you have a solid grounding in 'the basics'. It is certainly the case that many assignments fail to impress (especially projects and dissertations) because of a lack of good, clear English; likewise, many students, impressive in person, can fail to be called for interview simply because of poor English in their applications.

So, this booklet tries to cover the various conventions: of Grammar, Punctuation (including apostrophes), Spelling and Style.



## GRAMMAR - PARTS OF SPEECH

While it is not necessary to be able to parse every sentence, an awareness of the various parts of speech can help you spot and correct possible grammatical errors. For those wishing to take these basics further, there is some suggested reading at the end of this booklet.

### Nouns

These are names of things, whether concrete or abstract (e.g. *concept, measurement, foot, paragraph, earth*). A good test of a noun is to see if you can put an article (see below) before it; i.e. a *measurement*, or the *measurement*. Nouns are often subdivided into:

Common nouns, which are the kind instanced above, whether concrete or abstract.

Proper nouns (for persons and places - e.g. *Einstein, Zambia*), which usually start with a capital letter.

Collective nouns for things that are seen as part of a larger whole (e.g. *a team* of students, *a pack* of cards, *a panel* of judges); the important thing about collective nouns is that they usually take singular verbs (see below); e.g. '*That team* of students *is* doing well [not *are*]'. The plural is only used when you want to emphasise the individual parts of a collectivity; e.g. '*The team* *are* arguing amongst themselves'.

### Verbs

These are often called 'doing' words because they depict action; e.g. The student *wrote* her assignment, A tutor *thinks* about the project. (Note that the action can be mental as well as physical.) Verbs vary in several ways, but most important is an awareness of the following: tense, number, and voice.

Tense. Basically verbs can represent action in the present, in the past, or in the future; thus: *I write, I was writing/ I wrote, I shall write*.

Number. Verbs are either singular or plural, depending on the subject (i.e. the doer of the action): 'The tutor [singular subject] *gives* a lecture'; 'The tutors [plural subject] *give* a lecture'.

Voice. Verbs can be active or passive, depending on how the action is portrayed. If the subject is at the beginning of the sentence, the verb is usually active; that is, the subject acts; e.g. 'The student *answered* the question'. In the passive, it is the object of the sentence (the thing acted upon) which is often brought to the beginning; and sometimes the subject is not even mentioned; e.g. 'The question *was answered* [by the student]'.

The passive is usually longer, and should therefore be used warily, but it features a lot in academic writing, where the writer does not want to appear too subjective (i.e. by using the first person - 'I' or 'we'); e.g. 'The experiment *was conducted*, as opposed to '*I conducted* an experiment'.

### **Pronouns**

These are words that stand in place of nouns, to avoid repetition. So, in the last sentence, instead of saying 'Pronouns are words ...', the pronoun 'these' was used. There are different categories of pronouns, but common ones are: I, we, he, she, it, you, they; his, her, its, their; this, that, these, those; who, which, where, whose.

### **Articles**

These short words (a, an, the) accompany nouns, indicating whether something is defined - *the* book (using the definite article) - or undefined - *a* book (using the indefinite article).

### **Adjectives**

These words go with nouns, giving more information about them than articles provide. So, a *heavy* book, a *difficult* problem, an *easy* exam.

### **Adverbs**

These words go with verbs (or adjectives), again modifying their meaning. Many are recognisable because they end in *-ly* (e.g. *heavily*, *easily*), but some of the more common do not: e.g. *often*, *now*.

## **Conjunctions**

These are words which join together other parts of sentences. The most common, and overused, is *and*. There are many more, though: *but, or, also, because, since, yet*.

## **Prepositions**

These, usually very small words, indicate the location of things: *at, under, by, with, from, to*.

## **PUNCTUATION**

Punctuation is not about the pedantic placing of a few squiggles; rather, it is a way of making your meaning as clear as possible. For example, the sentence 'No change direction okay'. Does this mean, 'No change, direction okay', or 'No! Change direction. Okay?' ? These two ways of punctuating the sentence result in very different interpretations.

When speaking, much of this subtlety of meaning can be delivered by the speaker, through voice and body movement. With the voice, the speaker can stress certain phrases whilst turning others into asides; the voice can indicate a change of subject, or a brief parenthesis; it can raise questions, even make exclamations! And the voice is not alone; it is backed by a whole orchestra of body movements. Yet short of drawing little stick-figures with accompanying musical notation, writing needs other ways of conveying its expression; hence punctuation. The following attempts to explain, briefly, the function of each of these marks. You will find all used in context, of course, elsewhere in this booklet.

**CAPITAL LETTER** Used at the beginning of sentences, and for proper nouns, like *Piaget*, *Shakespeare*, and *God*.

. **Full-stop.** Used to demarcate the end of a sentence, which is a group of words that can stand alone, meaningfully. (*These can. But not these.*)

, **Comma** Used in sentences where there is a natural pause or division, as at the end of phrases, to break up lists of items, preceding direct speech, etc.

;**Semi-colon.** To denote a more substantial pause than a comma, but less definite than a full-stop. It is used to link related clauses, as here; also to connect items where the use of commas might be ambiguous. It is *not* used to introduce quotations (see below).

: **Colon.** Used to introduce something: a quotation, a list of items, or an expansion of what has gone before.

? **Question Mark.** Used to indicate a direct question, as in the following: *What about indirect questions?* Indirect questions are a different matter: they do not require question marks; thus: *He asked whether they should have question marks.* (The answer is No!)

! **Exclamation Mark.** Used - shock! horror! - to indicate exclamations. They are much overused by the tabloid press. In traditional academic work they should rarely be seen.

“ ”or ‘ ’ **Inverted Commas or Quotation Marks.** Most commonly used to indicate direct speech. Use either single or double inverted commas, but be consistent. They are also used to highlight particular words, e.g. a word you are discussing, or the title of a piece of work (poem, essay, article).

- **Hyphen.** Used to connect compound words (father-in-law), certain words with prefixes (ante-natal), and to indicate a break in a word at the end of a line. But beware of ambiguous breaks, e.g. 'parent-hesis'.

**( ) or [ ] Brackets.** (technically, only the second are 'brackets', the former being 'parentheses' – but the distinction is generally ignored). They are used to introduce extra information into your text (lists of items, examples, asides) without interrupting the main flow of your writing. Sometimes a pair of commas will do the job, depending on how relevant the extra material is. Note that full-stops fall outside brackets unless a complete sentence is bracketed off (see examples in the text).

– **Dash.** Dashes can be used – in pairs – instead of brackets. A dash on its own is often used to indicate an extra idea or piece of information, which has suddenly come to mind. Again – it should be used sparingly – some unimaginative writers use dashes incessantly – ignoring all other punctuating devices.

' **Apostrophe.** Used to indicate omitted letters, as in contractions like *don't* for *do not*, or *I'll* for *I will*. The most commonly misused contraction is *it's*, short for *it is*. This is a separate word from *its*, a possessive pronoun (see above). *It's* easy to tell *its* correct placing, though, by trying to spell it out in full. Thus, by saying '*It is* easy to tell *it is* correct placing', you should be able to see, or hear, that only the former needs the apostrophe.

Apostrophes also indicate possession, or belonging - e.g. *the student's book* (again, the language used to have a letter here - 'studentes' - which is now omitted, hence the apostrophe). Trying to reword a phrase is always a good test of the need for an apostrophe. For instance, *the student's book* = the book of the student, therefore the phrase needs one; *the students eat* = the eat of the students, which does not make sense, therefore no apostrophe is necessary.

Things now get complicated! We have established that singular verbs express possessiveness by adding an apostrophe and an *s*. But plural verbs, which usually have an *s* already added, put the apostrophe after the *s* (e.g. the work of the five students = *the five students' work*). Also,

singular words that end in *s* often have either an extra *s* added (e.g. *Mrs. Jones's essay*), or simply place an apostrophe after the initial *s*, if this sounds better (*Mrs. Jones' essay*). Finally, plural nouns that do not end in *s* have an *s* added, with the apostrophe preceding it (e.g. *people's, children's*).

## **SPELLING**

Spelling is taken 'as read' by those who can do it. For others it can be a nightmare, making any writing task doubly exacting. There are no instant ways to help you spell correctly, because there are no overarching rules. A computer was once fed such rules as do exist and it spelt 50% of the words correctly, but the other 50% wrongly! No wonder Bernard Shaw complained that the letters *ghoti* could be pronounced *fish* - given the pronunciation of these letters in other contexts (e.g. *cough, women, station*).

Bearing in mind this general lack of logic, this section tries to offer some help in coming to terms with English spelling. Some of the methods are based on rules, some on word meanings, and others again, on mnemonic techniques.

1. **Rules** Though all rules have exceptions, you might find the following useful:

\* **i** before **e** except after **c** - so *thief, relief, receive, conceive, ceiling* (and yet *chief, achievement!*).

\* Nouns with **c**, verbs with **s** - so *practice (n) but practise (v), advice (n), but advise (v), council (n) but counsel (v)*.

\* Words ending in **y** change the **y** to **i**, except when adding **-ing** - so *plenty > plentiful, rely > reliable > relying*.

\* Final single consonants are doubled in the following cases: words of one syllable, and words where the last syllable is stressed: *skip >*

*skipping, refer > referred.* However, do not double the final consonant where the stress is not on the last syllable: so, *offer > offering, profit > profiting.*

2. **Derivations** Many words belong to families of related words - called *cognates*. Sometimes you can conceive how a word is spelt by thinking of its cognates; e.g. *bomb - bombard, receipt - reception.*

Also, commonly misspelled words can deliberately be learnt in this way, by thinking about their origins; e.g. a *cupboard* was literally a 'cup board'. The following is a much misspelled word - *Fuschia/Fuchsia* - but far more memorable when you know it was named after a botanist called Fuchs.

3. **Prefixes/Suffixes** Learning how words change their meaning by adding bits to the beginning or end can help spelling; e.g., knowing that *mis* (wrong) and *un* (not) are prefixes explains why it is *mistaken* but *misshapen, unnecessary* yet *unopened*. Similarly with suffixes: *ly* - which turns many adjectives into adverbs - is simply added to the existing word; thus *solely* but *really, causally* although *callously*.

4. **Pronunciation** Often words are spelt wrongly because of the way we say them: e.g. *diffrent, reconise, Febury, goverment*. By pronouncing them more distinctly, if only in your head, spelling should improve: *different, recognise, February, government*, etc.

Some people have taken this technique further. They deliberately mispronounce difficult words (to themselves, that is) to emphasise any unusual spelling; e.g. ya-ch-t (*ch* said as in *chicken*), ac-quit, cha-os.

5. **Mnemonics** There are various mnemonics or 'memory aids' helpful to the poor speller. One technique links an unknown word with another already known: e.g. a good *speller* knows *propeller*, the *calendar* tells *days* and *dates*, *stationary car*, but *stationery envelopes*.

A related technique is to develop a pictorial association: *picnicking* - a *picnic* fit for a *king*, a *hangar* is a *garage* for planes.

A third way is to work the words into sayings: Spell *temperature* wrong again and I'll get in a *temper-at-U!*

Other students prefer to make up phrases from the initial letters of the word they want to spell; e.g. **N**ever **E**at **C**ake, **E**at **S**almon, **S**andwiches **A**nd **R**eain **Y**oung (= *Necessary*); or **B**e **E**ver **C**lever **A**nd **U**s **S**ome **E**ggs (= *Because*).

These techniques may seem laborious, but obviously, you only apply them where you have a problem. Frequently it's similar sounding words which are confused, and thus need distinguishing. Some of these are listed later. Thus, for the pairs of words like advice/advise mentioned earlier, remember that **n**ouns have **c**, the **v**erbs **s** (and both **n** and **c** precede **v** and **s** in the alphabet).

Other words that it is important to spell correctly are the ones that crop up in your particular subject area: *physiological* and *behavioural* in psychology and biology; *bourgeoisie* and *laissez-faire* in history; *negotiable* and *capital* in business, *grammar*, *character* and *caricature* in English; *analytic* and *empirical* in philosophy, *acceleration* and *temperature* in engineering; and, of course, all the proper names: *Nietzsche*, *Piaget*, *Maslow*, *Joule*, etc. Try to make a list of the words you have problems with and work on them.

One final point: don't get things out of perspective. Spelling correctly only became a major issue in the last century. The *O.E.D.* records eleven different spellings of the word *good* before this time. Shakespeare certainly varied his spelling of particular words - including his own name! James Brindley masterminded the British waterway system, yet couldn't spell *navigation*. Spelling is certainly a feature of good writing, but it is by no means the most important.

The remainder of this section consists of two lists: one of the most commonly confused groups of words - words that even your spell-checker won't spot; the second is of some of the most commonly misspelled words in higher education.

### Commonly Confused Words

accept	cheque	dependent	envelop
except			envelope
	choose	desert	
accessary	chose	dessert	formally
accessory			formerly
	cite	discreet	
affect	sight	discrete	hoard
effect	site		horde
		defuse	
allowed	complement	diffuse	human
aloud	compliment		humane
		elicit	
allusion	council	illicit	incite
illusion	counsel		insight
		eligible	
already		illegible	ingenious
all ready	currant		ingenuous
	current	eminent	
altogether		imminent	
all together	decease		it's
	disease	ensure	its
check		insure	
	dependant		lead

led	new	right	
	knew	rite	waist
leant		write	waste
lent	paw		
	poor	shear	waive
loath/loth	pore	sheer	wave
loathe	pour		
		stationary	weather
loose	pray	stationery	whether
lose	prey		were
		their	we're
marshal	precede	there	where
martial	proceed	they're	
			who's
meter	prescribe	to	whose
metre	proscribe	too	
		two	your
moral			you're
morale	principal	urban	
	principle	urbane	

## Commonly Misspelt Words

absence	appal(ling)	campaign	conscience
academically	apparatus	careful	conscientious
accessible	apparently	caricature	conscious
accommodation	appearance	carriage	consensus
achievement	appropriate	category	consistent
acknowledge	argument	cemetery	conspiracy
acquiesce	article	century	contemporary
acquire	assassinate	chaos	correspondence
across	associate	character	corroborate
address	attachment	chief	counterfeit
advertisement	attitude	collaborate	criticism
aggressor	author	colleague	cruelly
agreeable	awkward	college	curiosity
allege	barrenness	commemorate	cynicism
allot(ted)	basically	committee	
a lot	beautiful	comparatively	deceit
already	beginning	comparison	decision
altogether	believe		defence
amount	benefited	competent	defensive
analysis	business	completely	definite
ancillary		conceive	degradation
annihilate	calendar	condemn	democracy

descendant	feasible	irrelevant	negotiate
descent	February	irreparable	neighbour
description	fluorescent	irresistible	ninth
despair	fortunately	irreverent	no one
desperately	forty		noticeable
detached	fourteen	jealous	
deteriorate	friend		occasionally
deterrent	fulfil	keenness	occur(red)
develop		knowledgeable	occurrence
development	galloped		offered
died	gauge	laboratory	omission
difference	government	laid	opportunity
dilemma	governor	laissez faire	ordinarily
disappear	grammar	leisure	originally
disappoint	grievous	liaison	overrule
disastrous	guarantee	lieutenant	
discipline	guard	likelihood	paid
disillusioned		literature	paralleled
disservice	handkerchief	loathsome	paralysed
dissolve	harass	loneliness	parliamentary
duly	height		particularly
	hero(es)	maintain	peculiarly
eighth	hindrance	maintenance	permissible
embarrass	humorous	manageable	playwright
endeavour	humour	manoeuvring	poisonous
environment	hypocrisy	marriage	possession
equatorial		meant	precede
	identical	medicine	predecessor
exaggerate	illegibly	medieval (or	preferred
exceed	immediately	mediaeval)	prejudice
excellent	imminent	metaphor	preparation
except	in between	mimic(ked)	presence
exceptionally	incidentally	miniature	pretence
excitement	independence	minute	pretension
exercise	infinite	miscellaneous	primitive
exhibition	innocence	mischievous	privilege
existence	innuendo	misogyny	probably
expense	inoculate	monastery	procedure
experience	install	murmured	proceed
extraordinary	instalment	mystifying	professor
extravagant	insurrection		programme
extremely	intellectual	naive	pronunciation
	intelligence	navigable	propeller
familiar	intention	necessary	prove
favourite	interested	negligent	psychology

publicly	rhyme	successfully	unnecessary
punctually	rhythm	summarise (or -	
pursue	ridiculous	ize)	valley(s)
	rogue	supersede	valuable
quarrel(ling)	relevant	surfeit	vegetable
queue		surprise	vehicle
quietly	sacrilegious	systematic	vengeance
	scenery		veterinary
really	secretary	technical	vicious
receipt	seize	technique	vigorous
receive	sentence	temperature	villain
recommend	separate	temporary	virtually
reconnoitre	sergeant (or	tendency	
refer(red)	serjeant)	terrifying	wholly
referee	sheriff	thank you	wield
reference	silhouette	tragedy	wilful
referring	similarly	tragic	wiry
refrigerator	simile(s)	tranquillity	withhold
(fridge)	sincerely	tries	witticism
religious	skilful	truly	worshipped
reminiscence	soliloquy(-quies)	twelfth	
repetition	souvenir	tying	yield
reservoir	sovereignty	tyranny	
resistance	speech		
responsibility	subtlety, subtly	undoubtedly	

## STYLE

It is hard to deal with issues of style in a vacuum. However, the following sentences try to demonstrate some of the more common stylistic errors in a humorous way. Some of the items should provide a useful recap on points made earlier. Corrected versions, with explanations, are given at the end of the booklet.

- 1 Don't use contractions, abbrevns & initials, etc, when you're writing academically.

- 2 Position pronouns as near as possible, particularly in sentences of several lines where ambiguity is likely to confuse readers, to their antecedent nouns.
- 3 Do not use double negatives never.
- 4 Polysyllabic utterances should unrequitingly defer to the more succinct.
- 5 You should avoid using the second-person ('you') in academic writing, as it sounds like you're telling the tutors what they should think.
- 6 Passive verbs should be replaced by the active whenever it is permitted by the sense.
- 7 Having written a lot of dangling modifiers, the tutor refused to mark the student's work.
- 8 Do not 'overdo' "*scare quotes*", italics or bold fonts. If you *do*, you will *blow* their **impact**.
- 9 When a student starts writing in the singular, they should stay in it.
- 10 Avoid commas, where they serve, no function.
- 11 Do not overuse dashes – like this – as a way of connecting your prose – it's a sign of poor writing.
- 12 No sentence fragments.
- 13 Avoid open-ended sentences they are hard to understand.
- 14 Make sure simple plural's are not treated as possessive's.

- 15 Rereading is an excellent way of finding out whether you have repeated yourself, said the same thing twice, or need to edit after rereading your work.
- 16 When writing formal reports, I always make sure that I never use the first-person.
- 17 Make sure quotations fit grammatically, 'made sense'.
- 18 Mixed metaphors inevitably come unstuck when they hit the fan.
- 19 Endeavour to circumvent the occurrence of unnecessarily pompous and verbose pronouncements, which usually look like you are 'woffling' and short of the word length.
- 20 Avoid what is known as the 'comma splice', it is used to join two sentences that would be more appropriately left as separate sentences.
- 21 Make sure the parts of your sentence are balanced, logical, and that there is punctuation.
- 22 Last but not least, avoid clichés like the plague.

### **FURTHER READING**

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### **Answers to Stylistic Errors, Above**

1. Do not use contractions when you are writing academically.  
[Contractions are words that have been shortened by omitting letters; as in can't for cannot.]
  
2. Position pronouns as near as possible to their antecedent nouns, particularly in sentences of several lines where ambiguity is likely to confuse readers.  
[Pronouns are short words that stand in for nouns – as with *their* above; you can see the problems that can arise if there is too much distance between the noun and its pronoun. Here's another ambiguous example:  
'Peter said to Paul that one should wash, one should dry. He did it.' Who did what?]
  
3. Do not use double negatives.  
[In English, negatives are seen to cancel each other out, so one will suffice; the first sentence effectively means, 'Use double negatives sometimes.']
  
4. Never use long words where short ones will do.  
[This one should be straightforward. You will obviously use technical terms, but don't tax your reader unnecessarily.]

- 5 Avoid using the second-person ('you') in academic writing, as it sounds like the tutors are being told what they should think.  
[Again, this should be straightforward.]
- 6 The active should replace the passive wherever possible.  
[Sentences constructed in the passive are longer, harder to decode, and often change the normal order of things. Here's an example: 'She hit him' (*active*); 'He was hit by her' (*passive*). Passives are necessary in academic writing, and often perform useful functions, but try not to overdo them.]
- 7 The student, having written a lot of dangling modifiers, had his work refused by the tutor.  
[Modifiers are parts of sentences (phrases, clauses) that in some way add more information. They *dangle* when they are not tied down to the right word or phrase. In the original example, it thus sounds as though the tutor was the one that had written the dangling modifiers, rather than the student. Here's another example: 'Having completed the experiment, the mice were of no further use.']
- 8 Do not overdo 'scare quotes', italics or bold fonts. If you do, you will 'blow' their impact.  
[This one should be clear; *scare quotes* are generally used where a word might be considered inappropriate (because it is slang, idiomatic, uncouth, or politically incorrect).]
- 9 When a student starts writing in the singular, he or she should stay in it.  
[Don't change from singular to plural. Sometimes it is seen as excusable in order to avoid sexist writing, but there are usually more elegant ways around it; e.g. 'If a person lies, they should be punished.' Prefer: 'If people lie, they should be punished.']
- 10 Avoid commas where they serve no function.  
[Commas help break sentences up into meaningful units; the original comma actually impeded the flow of meaning.]

- 11 Do not overuse dashes as a way of connecting your prose. It is a sign of poor writing.  
[This one should be obvious.]
- 12 Do not use sentence fragments.  
[These are sentences that lack some element – usually a finite verb; e.g. ‘The man sitting on the bench.’ In order to make this a proper sentence, more information is needed: ‘The man sitting on the bench got up.’ You’ll find sentence fragments in creative works, but they shouldn’t appear in academic writing.]
- 13 Avoid open-ended sentences. They are hard to understand.  
[This should be straightforward. If not, try reading the original again, slowly, and out loud.]
- 14 Make sure simple plurals are not treated as possessives.  
[See the information on apostrophes, earlier. Note that dates are usually simple plurals, too: the 1900s, the 1980s.]
- 15 Rereading is an excellent way of finding out whether you have repeated yourself, or need to edit your work.  
[As in 13, this should be straightforward; if not, read the original again, slowly, and out loud.]
- 16 When writing formally, always make sure that the first person is never used.  
[Opinions are changing slowly on this, so consult your Department; but generally, avoid drawing too much attention to yourself: it is the work that is important.]
- 17 Make sure quotations fit grammatically, that they have ‘made sense’.  
[Note how this has been rephrased, adding the word ‘have’ in order that the tense of the verb fits.]

- 18 Mixed metaphors inevitably come unstuck, however good the joiner.  
[The original mixes two metaphors: *coming unstuck* and *hitting the fan*. The result is comical. Note that the above could have been rewritten differently – ‘Mixed metaphors inevitably hit the fan’ – but less effectively.]
- 19 Try to avoid long-winded and pretentious writing.  
[Again, this should be straightforward: say things directly.]
- 20 Avoid what is known as the ‘comma splice’. It is used to join two sentences that would be more appropriately left as separate sentences.  
[Again, this should grate in the original; stronger punctuation is needed, either using a full stop (as in the above) or a semi-colon.]
- 21 Make sure the parts of your sentence are balanced, logical, and punctuated.  
[Unbalanced sentences should jar. They occur where there is ‘faulty parallelism’; that is, where one of the elements in a list unfolds in a grammatically different way.]
- 22 Lastly, avoid clichés.  
[Academic writing tries to be precise, so avoid loose, hackneyed sayings, slang, and the like.]