

The Bristol University  
(England)

## Grammar and Style Guide

Adapted for Killarney Secondary

(For all your writing needs)

## Why improve your understanding of grammar and punctuation?

Surely, in these days of word processors with their built-in grammar- and spell-checkers, there is no need to understand the rules and anomalies of English grammar and punctuation? Well, here are some reasons why doing some of these exercises and improving your understanding of such things could turn out to be a shrewd investment of your time:

Grammar checkers on computers are by no means foolproof. They sometimes attempt to correct things that are perfectly correct, and often miss glaring errors. Unlike you, the writer, they are totally unconcerned with the meaning of your sentence and are simply following a predefined set of rules. While there is no doubt that they are useful, relying on them is highly dangerous.

Even so, why should you need to spend any time acquiring an understanding of grammar and punctuation?

As you go through your university life, there will be various people it would be good to impress: most obviously, your tutors and your future employer. Poor punctuation and grammar will cause you to lose marks in essays. Good punctuation and grammar will not only improve your marks, but, used skillfully, can make your arguments more persuasive and engaging.

Almost all employers, and certainly those recruiting for 'graduate level jobs', view effective written communication as a highly desirable skill. It is also a skill that many potential candidates lack; improving your understanding of grammar and punctuation could help you into the career of your choice. Once in your 'graduate level job', you will almost certainly be engaging with the written word in some way. Clearly-written, grammatically-correct, properly-punctuated reports are likely to catch your manager's eye for the right reasons.

## The colon.

The colon is a widely misused but very useful piece of punctuation. Use it correctly and it can add precision to your written work as well as impressing your tutors and future employers. There are not many people around who are able to use colons correctly. The colon has a number of functions:



### **To introduce an idea.**

The colon has two main uses. Firstly it is used to introduce an idea that is an explanation or continuation of the one that comes before the colon. The colon can be considered as a gateway inviting the reader to go on. Have a look at these examples:

You are left with only one option: Press on until you have mastered it.

There is one thing you need to know about coleslaw: it looks and tastes like slurry.

In the above examples you have some idea of what will come after the colon. It is important to note that the clause that comes before the colon can stand alone and make complete sense on its own.

If the initial clause cannot stand alone and make complete sense, you should **not** use a colon.

There is some debate about whether the clause following the colon should begin with a capital letter or not. If the colon precedes a formal quote, you should begin the language of that quote with a capital letter. If the explanation that follows the colon contains more than one sentence, you should use a capital letter. In other cases, some guides simply advise consistency, others advise that a capital should always be used.

### **To introduce a list.**

The second main use of the colon is to introduce a list. You need to take care; many people assume that a colon *always* precedes a list. This is not the case. Again it is important to remember that the clause that precedes the colon must make complete sense on its own.

Have a look at these examples:

The potion contained some exotic ingredients: snails' eyes, bats' tongues and garlic.

The magic potion contained sesame seeds, bran flakes and coleslaw.

In the first sentence, the clause preceding the colon has a subject and a predicate and makes complete sense on its own 'The potion contained some exotic ingredients.' In the second sentence a colon should not be used, as the clause that would precede it would not make sense alone 'The magic potion contained'.

### **To introduce quoted material.**

The colon has other uses: it can also be used after a clause introducing quoted material. Have a look at this example.

The director often used her favourite quotation from Monty Python: 'I wasn't expecting the Spanish Inquisition.'

If the colon precedes a quotation, you should begin the language of that quote with a capital letter.

### **Style.**

Having mastered the correct use of the colon, it is useful to make it work for you in your writing. Using a colon can add emphasis to an idea. For example, consider the following two sentences:

The one thing mankind cannot live without is hope.

There is one thing that mankind cannot live without: hope.

Both sentences are grammatically correct, but the second makes the point a little more forcefully. Now we are in the realms of style, it is important to emphasise that you, as the writer, have to decide how to make your newfound expertise with punctuation work for you. Do not be tempted to overuse colons. They are powerful but should be used with precision and care.

## The semicolon.

The semicolon is a hugely powerful punctuation mark. Getting it right will not only impress your tutors and future employers, it will allow you to express your ideas and opinions with more subtlety and precision than ever before. The good news is that it is simple and easy to use and should take you no more than a few minutes to master.

### **In complicated lists.**

The semicolon can be used to sort out a complicated list containing many items, many of which themselves contain commas.

Have a look at this example:

In the meeting today we have Professor Wilson, University of Barnsley, Dr Watson, University of Barrow in Furness, Colonel Custard, Metropolitan Police and Dr Mable Syrup, Genius General, University of Otago, New Zealand.

In a situation such as this, only the mighty semicolon can unravel the mess.

In the meeting today we have Professor Wilson, University of Barnsley; Dr Watson, University of Barrow in Furness; Colonel Custard, Metropolitan Police and Dr Mable Syrup, Genius General, University of Otago, New Zealand.

In most lists a comma is enough to separate the items. In a complicated list like the one above, it is perfectly acceptable to use the semicolon to make the list more understandable.

Test your understanding of punctuating lists with this [exercise](#).

### **Separating closely-related independent clauses.**

The semicolon is also used to connect two closely-related independent clauses. Have a look at this example:

Terry always slept with the light on; he was afraid of the dark.

The two clauses here are closely connected but the link has not been made explicit. They could have been separated by a full stop.

Terry always slept with the light on. He was afraid of the dark.

They could have been connected by a conjunction.

Terry always slept with the light on because he was afraid of the dark.

Terry always slept with the light on, as he was afraid of the dark.

In this instance we have changed the second clause into a dependent clause; it is directly dependent on the first clause.

If you are going to use a semicolon to connect two clauses, it is very important that the two clauses are both independent. That means that each clause has to be able to stand alone and make complete sense without the other. If either one cannot stand alone, a semicolon **cannot** be used.

### **Style.**

Using the semicolon to separate the two clauses has allowed us to imply the relationship between the two without stating it explicitly. This can be quite a powerful tool in allowing/encouraging your reader to make implicit connections. As the reader is involved in the development of the idea, it may well be more persuasive than simply stating the causal relationship between the two clauses. The decision as to whether to use a semicolon or to make the two clauses into separate sentences is one of style and, as such, is up to you the writer. As with many punctuation marks, the semicolon is powerful and can give your writing a good deal more style and precision, but it should not be over used.

## The comma

The comma is a much misused and often over used piece of punctuation. The complexity of its usage stems primarily from the fact that there are several different situations in which the comma is the correct piece of punctuation to use. The trick is to identify those situations so as not to use the comma in places where it really should not be.

The following are some of the situations in which a comma should be used:

### **1. To separate the elements in a list of three or more items.**

The potion included gobstoppers, chewing gum, bran flakes and coleslaw.

There appears to be some debate about whether or not to include a comma to separate the last two items in the series. Personally I was taught to omit the comma before the final 'and' unless there is a danger that the last two items in the series will merge and become indistinguishable without the comma.

His favourite puddings were ice apple pie, rhubarb crumble, and jelly and ice cream.

In this sentence it is acceptable to use a comma after the word crumble in order to indicate that the jelly and ice cream is considered as a single item in the series. This is called the Oxford comma. There are occasions where it is definitely needed in order to avoid unnecessary confusion. In the sentence below, the inclusion of the Oxford comma would have avoided some confusion.

I dedicate this work to my parents, Marie Smith and God.

### **2. Before certain conjunctions.**

A comma should be used before these conjunctions: and, but, for, nor, yet, or, so to separate two independent clauses. They are called co-ordinating conjunctions.

She was a fantastic cook, but she would never be as good as her mother-in-law.

He hated his neighbours, so he never invited them round.

A common mistake is to put the comma after the conjunction.

It is not usually necessary or indeed correct to use a comma with the conjunction 'because'.

We all had to move to higher ground because the floodwaters were rising quickly.

She really didn't feel hungry because she had already eaten a hearty lunch.

However, there are occasions when a 'because clause' needs to be set off with a comma in order to avoid any confusion of meaning.

I knew she would not be hungry, because my sister works in a restaurant and had seen her eating a huge meal earlier in the day.

In this example the reason for the person in question not being hungry is nothing to do with the sister's working in a restaurant as might be indicated if the comma were omitted.

### **3. To separate introductory elements in a sentence.**

Use a comma to separate introductory elements in a sentence from the main part of that sentence.

Given the appalling weather conditions, Michael was lucky to survive the storm.

As the night drew to a close, the clubbers wandered home.

Having mastered the use of the colon, it is important to make it work for you in your writing.

If the introductory element of the sentence is very short, it is permissible to omit the comma. If the introductory phrase is more than about three words, the comma is recommended.

Shortly we will be leaving for the port.

After his nap Sam felt a lot better.

After a deliciously long nap in his hammock, Sam felt a lot better.

If a brief introductory phrase, however short, is likely to merge with the rest of the sentence and confuse the reader, the comma is required.

Inside the house was a total mess.

Inside, the house was a total mess.

Until the summer lectures will take place in the main building

Until the summer, lectures will take place in the main building.

The comma is also required if the introductory phrase, however short, appears to modify the meaning of the sentence.

Sadly, the whole building was beginning to crumble.

On the other hand, the new extension looked fantastic.

#### **4. To separate parenthetical elements in a sentence.**

A comma is used to set off parenthetical elements in a sentence. The parenthetical element (also known as an aside) is part of the sentence that can be removed without changing the essential meaning of the sentence.

Sarah, the most intelligent pupil in the class, was always late for school.

The pyramids, one of the wonders of the ancient world, lie just outside Cairo.

If you are using a comma to do this, it is important that the aside is opened and closed with a comma. A common mistake is to omit the second comma.

If the parenthetical element in the sentence is closely identified with the subject the comma may not be necessary.

His wife Jill was a high flyer in the city.

Jill, his wife, was a high flyer in the city.

#### **5. To separate direct speech or quoted elements from the rest of the sentence.**

Commas are used to separate direct speech or quoted elements from the rest of a sentence. Use a comma to separate the quoted material from the rest of the sentence.

"That house there," he whispered, "is where I grew up."

"Give me the money," he snarled, "unless you want to meet your maker."

Note that a comma is not always needed in direct speech if another punctuation mark serves to separate the quoted element from the rest of the sentence. Look at the following example:

"Give me the money!" he snarled.

Take care to avoid the [comma splice](#). Look at the following example:

"That cake looks delicious," she said. "Where can I get the recipe?"

"That cake looks delicious," she said, "Where can I get the recipe?"

The two quoted elements are separate sentences and as such need to be separated by a full stop. A comma alone is not enough.

#### **6. Commas are used to separate elements in a sentence that express contrast.**

He was first attracted by her money, not her stunning looks.

She is intelligent, not pretty.

He thought the building was enormous, but ugly.

#### **7. Commas are used for typographical reasons to separate dates and years, towns and counties etc.**

His home was in Streatham, East London.

My father was born on March 13, 1949.

#### **8. Commas are used to separate several adjectives.**

The old, ramshackle, dilapidated house had a charm of its own.

That rather dull-looking, badly-dressed, clumsy man is actually a university professor.

As a general rule, if you can put the word 'and' or 'or' between the adjectives, then the comma is appropriate. If you cannot, the comma should be omitted.

The little old house was in a beautiful wood.

The comma has specific uses and, like all punctuation marks, can make your writing more precise and persuasive. Many tutors and academics complain that the comma is over used or inappropriately used. **Take good care that you do not simply sprinkle your work with commas without good reason.**

## The comma splice.

The comma splice is one of the most frequent mistakes made when using a comma. The comma splice occurs when a comma is used to connect two independent clauses.

In this example, the two clauses make sense on their own. Connecting them with a comma is incorrect

Jim usually gets on with everybody, he is an understanding person.

If you have two independent clauses that need to be separated, you have several choices:

You can make them into two sentences using a full stop. This is probably the easiest solution but may not be the best in terms of style or developing your argument.

Jim usually gets on with everybody. He is an understanding person.

You can use a semicolon. Semicolons should not be overused but can be very powerful when used in the correct situations. In our example, using a semi-colon suggests a link between the two clauses without stating that link specifically. This can be a powerful tool in developing a convincing argument.

Jim usually gets on with everybody; he is an understanding person.

You can introduce a conjunction to connect the sentences. By doing this, you make the connection between the two more explicit.

Jim usually gets on with everybody because he is an understanding person.

Jim usually gets on with everybody, as he is an understanding person.

## The hyphen (-)

This little piece of punctuation is becoming less and less used. There are, however, occasions where the hyphen is definitely required.

If you use justified text, your computer will automatically adjust the spacing between words to ensure that you do not need to hyphenate words that have come at the end of a line. This is an extremely good thing, as the rules governing where a hyphen should fall in a given word are complicated and dull to say the very least.

There are some instances in which you will need to use a hyphen.

### **All words consisting of *self* combined with a noun:**

self-expression

self-confidence

self-consciousness

### **In adjectives that have been formed by combining two words:**

nineteenth-century history

self-paced learning exercises

off-the-peg suits

old-furniture salesman

Take care to use the hyphen only in situations where the hyphenated word is used as an adjective as in the above examples. Contrast these two examples:

He was an old-furniture salesman. (The furniture is old)

He was an old furniture salesman. (The salesman is old)

Tumultuous events took place in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

We have several verbs in English that consist of a verb and a preposition. Have a look at these verbs and the nouns that can be formed as a result:

to hold up ... This is a hold-up.

to wash up ... Go and do the washing-up.

to tell off ... The tutor gave him a good telling-off.

## The dash (--)



The dash is longer than a hyphen. There are in fact two different dashes: the en-dash is the same width as a letter N, while the em-dash is the same width as the letter M. Both of these can be found by on MS Word by going to: Insert, Symbol and then selecting the dash you require.

The dash can be used to set off parenthetical elements, when those elements themselves contain internal forms of punctuation. Use the em-dash in these situations.

Consider the following sentences:

My friends, Paul, Barry, Steve and Homer, all love rhubarb crumble.

My friends--Paul, Barry, Steve and Homer--all love rhubarb crumble.

The dash should **not** be used to set off parenthetical elements when a comma would do just as well. There needs to be a good reason to use the dash. The em-dash can also be used in direct speech to signal a break in thought or a shift in tone.

'What on earth can I do-, ' Alan jumped up and ran to the door.

'I've just asked you to--oh what was I telling you?'

The en-dash (the em-dash's slightly slimmer cousin) is used for indicating the space between dates in a chronological range.

The Second World War (1939-1945) was one of mankind's darkest hours.

# The apostrophe

## Contractions

One use of the apostrophe is in contracted words. The apostrophe is used to indicate that a letter or letters has/have been removed. If you follow this rule then it will avoid confusion about where the apostrophe should be.

He is = he's

I am = I'm

Do not = Don't

They have = They've

It is = It's

I would = I'd

Let us = Let's

She has = She's

Who is = who's

This is not an exhaustive list of contractions. There are many more but all follow the same rule. In examples such as "she'd" (the contracted form of she would) the apostrophe replaces several letters. Obviously, only one apostrophe is needed to indicate that several letters have been omitted.

You need to be a bit careful with apostrophes; many people make the mistake of putting them in all over the place. Contracted forms are very common in spoken language but should **not** be used in a formal academic essay. In formal/academic writing you must use the full, unabbreviated form.

Clayton does not find any evidence that densely amnesiac patients show reduced performance on other measures of working memory.

There is no doubt that successive presidents of the United States have found difficulty in balancing pressures from home and abroad.

The only place they could legitimately appear is in quotations.

"I'm drowning!!" he shouted.

### **The apostrophe showing possession.**

A second and trickier use of the apostrophe is to show possession. If the possessor is a singular noun, an -'s is added to the end of the noun. This is true for both proper nouns (people and places beginning with a capital letter) and common nouns (other nouns). Here are some examples of the apostrophe at work showing possession:

He found himself lost in Madrid's winding streets.

I cannot understand Tim's point of view.

The building's foundations were very unstable.

The poet's work was highly regarded around the world.

A very common mistake is to put apostrophes where they should not be. Many people, unsure about using the apostrophe, put it in every time they see a word ending in s. Grammar checkers do not always highlight this mistake, as they do not know the meaning of the sentence.

Bristol contain's a lot of lovely old building's and street's.

I have never seen the mountain's and the sea's look so beautiful.

If the possessor is a plural noun ending in s, simply adding an apostrophe after the final s indicates possession.

The teacher was always losing her pupils' books.

The monks' meals were served in a cold and damp dining room.

I can never understand the politicians' obsession with spin.

As you can see, the positioning of the apostrophe makes a big difference to the meaning of the sentence. Make sure when adding the apostrophe that it indicates your intended meaning very precisely.

The *monk's* meals were served in a cold, damp room. (one monk)

The *monks'* meals were served in a cold, damp room. (lots of monks)

If the plural noun does not end in an *s*, the addition of *'s* shows possession.

The children's books lay on the table.

The men's boots were lined up outside the door.

The women's race will take place before the children's race.

If the possessor is a singular noun that happens to end in an *-s*, there is some debate about whether the apostrophe is simply added after the *-s* or whether an *'s* is needed.

It appears that both are acceptable. Whichever you decide to use, make sure you are consistent. The university English department's style guide recommends that proper nouns that end in *-s* form their possessive form by adding *'s*.

Have you seen James' book?

Have you seen James's book?

The exceptions to this rule are proper nouns that are Latin or Greek in origin.

Odysseus' adventures spanned many miles and many many years.

Pythagoras' theorem has baffled generations of school children.

## Common Confusions

There are several instances where even the most competent writer may have to stop and think about his/her choice of words. There are a number of words in English, which sound the same but have different spellings and meanings. There are also many words, which are very similar and easily confused. This next section looks at some of these words and explains when they should be used. You can either work your way through them all in turn, or you can go straight to the words that are giving you problems.

### Whose and Who's

It is important to distinguish between these two. The grammar checker on MS Word is not good at spotting problems with these two and sometimes advises the incorrect option.

"Who's" is the contracted form of "who is" or "who has".

Remember that contracted words should not be used in formal essays. The only time they can legitimately appear is in direct speech.

"**Who's** going to the cinema today?" he asked. (who is)

"Trevor, **who's** going to play James Bond, is an awful actor," he retorted. (who is)

"**Who's** got the chocolate?" (who has)

"Whose" is a possessive form meaning "of whom" or "belonging to who" and is used in the following way:

**Whose** books are these?

The men, **whose** lives were ruined, claimed compensation from the government.

I do not know **whose** shoes smell worst.

If you are in any doubt, consider whether the **who's/whose** you are using can be replaced by who is or who has. If it can, then you need "who is", if not you will need "whose".

## It's and Its.

These two cause all sorts of problems and it is well worth the two minutes it takes to understand the difference between the two.

**It's** is the contracted form of 'it has' or 'it is' and is used in the following ways:

"**It's** been a long time since we spoke," he whispered. (it has)

"Come on," he shouted, "**it's** a lovely day!" (it is)

"There is no way **it's** going to be ready on time."(it is)

"**It's** been ready for weeks!" (it has)

**Its** is the possessive form of it, meaning 'of it'. This is possibly why the difference between it's and its causes so many problems. **Its**, without an apostrophe, is a possessive form, where an apostrophe is usually required. It is similar to words like his and her, neither of which needs an apostrophe.

The building was missing **its** doors and windows.

The tree had lost all of **its** leaves.

Has your chewing gum lost **its** flavour?

Madrid is famous for **its** art galleries.

## There and Their and They're (but never Thurr).

Another easy one to sort out.

**Their** is the possessive form indicating belonging to them. You should only use this when you are indicating possession to a group. Look at the examples below.

The children all ate **their** sandwiches.

The soldiers polished **their** rifles.

The Greek people are justifiably proud of **their** beautiful country.

The passengers complained that the airline had lost **their** luggage.

**There** is the place, i.e. not here.

It is also used when saying 'there is' and 'there are'.

Put those books over **there** please.

I found the old shoes in **there**.

**There** are thousands of stars visible from Earth.

**There** is soot all over the new carpet.

**They're** is the contracted form of "they are". Remember that abbreviations like this should not be used in essays and other formal writing. They are fine in reported speech.

'**They're** all going to the cinema this evening,' said Paul's mum.

'I can't see where **they're** coming from!' he yelled.

'**They're** waiting for you in the interview room.'

'Do you know where **they're** going to be this afternoon?'

## To, Two and Too.

These three are occasionally muddled. Luckily it is easy to sort out when to use them.

**Two** is the number. In academic writing it is better to use the written form than to write the numeral '2'. There is more on using numbers in formal writing [here](#).

When I looked in the tin, there were only **two** biscuits left.

Tim has only got **two** friends: Colin and Donald.

**Two** cars passed the building shortly before the explosion.

We were stopped by **two** angry-looking policemen.

**Too** is used with adverbs and adjectives in sentences like these:

English grammar is far **too** complicated for me.

I'm not buying this car; it is far **too** expensive.

The French speak **too** quickly for me to understand them completely.

The match was none **too** exciting until the final few minutes.

**To** is the most common of these three words. It has several different uses.

It is used with verbs in their infinitive form.

I think it is going **to rain** today.

Paul and Steve both had ambitions **to become** professional bowls players.

When I win the lottery, I would like **to spend** a year travelling the world.

There is no need **to shout**.

Remember that you should not put anything in between the 'to' and the rest of the verb infinitive. This is known as a [split infinitive](#).

'To' is also used in the sense of 'towards'.

I walk **to** school every day.

Next month I am travelling **to** India and then **to** Thailand.

'Get **to** the back of the queue!'

'Are you going **to** the shops later on today?'

## Who and Whom.

This seems to cause some problems but can be easily sorted out.

Essentially, **who** is a subject pronoun and should be used to replace the subject of the verb.

**Whom** is an object pronoun and should be used either to replace the object of a verb, or to follow a preposition.

A simple test is to see whether you can replace the who/whom with a subject pronoun (I or he) or an object pronoun (me or him).

**Whom** did you see? (Did you see **him**?)

I cannot see **who** is in the classroom. (**He** is in the classroom.)

To **whom** it may concern. (To **him**...)

**Who** has lost their shoes? (**He** has lost his shoes.)

## I or me.

This can cause some problems and again, is easily sorted.

If we can get a little grammatical here, **I** should be used when it is the subject of the sentence that is the person doing the verb. **Me** should be used for the object of the sentence either direct or indirect.

A good test as to which one to use is to think which one would be used if the other person were not included in the sentence.

These are the kinds of situations where there could be a problem deciding whether to use I or me.

The situation was awful for Paul and **me**. (...was awful for me.)

Paul and **I** were out strolling along the seafront when the ship sank. (I was out...)

She asked if she could come out with Julia and **me**. (...come out with me.)

Julia and **I** were very pleased to have her along. (I was very pleased...)

She thought she'd seen Jane and **me**. (...she'd seen me.)

My best friend and **I** are off to India at the end of the month. (**I** am off ...)

Imagine that the other person or people are not included in the sentence. It should then be obvious whether to use **I** or **me**.

## Less/Fewer.

This decision can cause some problems. Luckily, it is easily solved. The most common mistake is to use 'less' when 'fewer' would be correct. It is unlikely you would make the reverse error.

**Less** is used with things/material that cannot be counted or separated into individual parts. You can not count orange juice, sunshine, sand etc (although you can count litres of orange juice, hours of sunshine, grains of sand etc)

I would like **less** custard please. (Custard is not countable)

You get **less** jam in a smaller jar. (Jam is not countable)

There is a lot **less** rain in the Greek islands than in Bristol. (Rain is not countable)

Once I heard what happened, I had far **less** sympathy with her. (Sympathy is not countable)

**Fewer** is used with discrete things that can be separated or counted. CDs, sausages, cows, people etc can be counted. By far the most common mistake is to use 'less' when 'fewer' is needed.

If only there were **fewer** people in this bus. (People are individual, countable things)

He decided he should buy **fewer** CDs. (CDs are individual, countable things)

Steve always buys **fewer** drinks than the rest of us! (Drinks are individual, countable things)

I will have to take **fewer** holidays this year. (Holidays are individual, countable things)

## Like or As.

This is another instance where a simple rule will help you to make sense of something that many people still get wrong.

**Like** is a preposition (don't panic), which means that it can come before a noun but it should not come before a whole clause containing a verb. **As** is a conjunction, and can be used before a clause containing a verb.

**As** I told you, the car was parked behind a tree.

We could take a trip to the coast, just **like** old times.

**As** we thought, the weather was awful.

In formal academic text, you should avoid using 'like' in a sentence like this one.

It looks **like** it is going to rain.

The hero feels **like** he is the most powerful man on earth.

He looks **like** he has had a rough night.

It is better to substitute 'like' with 'as if'

It looks **as if** it is going to rain.

The hero feels **as if** he is the most powerful man on earth.

He looks **as if** he has had a rough night.

When listing things that are similar it is better to avoid 'like' and use 'such as', as in these examples.

The hero has many engaging qualities **like** courage, kindness and compassion.

The hero has many engaging qualities **such as** courage, kindness and compassion.

I have visited many tropical countries **like** India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia and Brunei.

I have visited many tropical countries **such as** India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia and Brunei.

In this country we eat a lot of junk food **like** chips, hamburgers and other rubbish.

In this country we eat a lot of junk food **such as** chips, hamburgers and other rubbish.

## Confusable words.

English is full of words, which sound the same or similar yet have different meaning and are easily confused. A computer spell checker will not highlight a word that is spelled correctly but used incorrectly. If you are uncertain about the correct spelling of a particular word, the only way to be certain is to look the word up in a dictionary and check the definition so you know you are using the correct word. Below are some commonly confused words with their definitions and examples of their use.

Whether - is used in indirect questions to introduce one alternative.

Weather - is a noun meaning the state of the atmosphere at a given time and place.

I'm not sure whether he is from Bolton or from Blackpool.

I am certain that the weather is going to be fantastic tomorrow.

Affect - is a verb meaning to have an influence on

Effect - is a noun meaning a cause of change brought about by an agent.

Poor grammar may affect your essay marks.

Poor grammar had a huge effect on his academic achievements.

Uninterested means to find something boring or dull.

Disinterested means impartial.

I am uninterested in this book; it is totally boring.

The judge and jury are personally disinterested in the outcome of the case.

Loose - is an adjective meaning not fastened, contained or restrained.

Lose - is a verb and has many meanings such as not to win, to mislay etc

That roof tile is loose and might fall at any minute.

You must not lose that cheque.

Cite - is a verb meaning to quote as an authority or example.

Sight - is a noun meaning the ability to see or something that is seen.

Site - is a noun meaning a place or setting of something.

In a good essay, it is important to cite expert opinion.

In his old age he had poor sight.

This would be a good site for a new golf course.

Allowed - this is the past participle of the verb to allow and means given permission.

Aloud - this is an adjective and means using a (loud) voice.

You are not allowed to go to the cinema this evening.

He was asked to read the poem aloud.

Comprise - is a verb meaning to consist of or be composed of.

Compose - to make up the constituent parts of.

The USA comprises 50 states.

The USA is composed of 50 states.

Accept - is a verb and has many meanings among which are to receive something.

Except - is a preposition meaning 'with the exclusion of'.

I would like you to accept this gift.

All his friends came to the party except Jim who was in hospital.

Elicit - is a verb meaning to bring or draw out/gather information.

Illicit - is an adjective meaning not sanctioned by custom or law.

I tried to elicit information from my interviewees.

The football manager was involved in an illicit affair.

Imply - To express or indicate indirectly.

Infer - To conclude from evidence or premises.

Somebody will imply something and the recipient of the implication will infer from it.

She tried to imply that I could not understand the question.

From what he said, I was able to infer that he did not understand the situation.

Incredible - so implausible as to elicit disbelief/astonishing

Incredulous - sceptical of disbelieving.

The golden tower was utterly incredible.

When I first saw the tower I was utterly incredulous.

Passed - this is the past tense of the verb to pass.

Past - the time before the present, no longer current.

He passed the ball to the striker.

He hoped that the unfortunate incident was now firmly in the past.

Historic - means having importance in or influence on history.

Historical - means 'of or relating to the character of history.'

It was a wet day when Cook set off on his historic voyage.

The archaeological find was of major historical significance.

Assert - to express or maintain positively/affirm.

Ensure - to make sure or certain.

Assure - to give confidence/remove doubt.

He was very keen to assert his innocence.

I wanted to ensure that the car would be ready on time.

The mechanic was able to assure me that my car would be ready on time.

Complement - to complete, make whole or bring to perfection.

Compliment - an expression of praise, admiration or congratulation.

The wine complemented the fish perfectly.

The guests complimented her on the lovely meal.

Precede - to come before in time or rank.

Proceed - to go forward or onwards.

The abstract should precede the main body of the report.

I instructed him to proceed with the research.

Advice - is the noun

Advise - is the verb.

She gave me some good advice about the problem of noisy neighbours.

I asked him to advise me about my noisy neighbours.

Your - means belonging to you.

You're - is the contracted form of 'you are'.

Are these smelly things your shoes?

You're going to have to get rid of these shoes, they're beyond repair.

Loath - reluctant or unwilling

Loathe - to hate or detest.

I am loath to finish this report; I am uninterested in the subject.

I loathe this room; the wallpaper will have to be changed.

Climactic - relating to or resulting in a climax.

Climatic - relating to the climate.

The war was described as a climactic event.

While planning the voyage, he paid close attention to the climatic conditions.

Dependent - relying on or requiring the aid of another.

Dependant - one who relies on another especially for financial support.

I am dependent on my supervisor for some good advice.

He wanted to emigrate with his wife and all his dependants.

Council - an assembly or collection of persons.

Counsel - (to give) advice, opinions or advice.

He was elected to represent his class on the school council.

I would counsel you to pay the fine and draw a line under the matter.

Prophecy - to reveal by divine inspiration.

Prophecy - an inspired utterance of a prophet.

The mystic used to sit beneath the waterfall and prophesy.

He would sit next to the waterfall and deliver his prophecy.

Stationary - not moving.

Stationery - office supplies.

The broken down car was stationary.

Finding he had run out of pencils, Mr Bush ordered more stationery.

Economic - of or relating to the economy.

Economical - thrifty and prudent in management.

The country was experiencing a period of sustained economic growth.

The minister was accused of being somewhat economical with the truth.

## Using quoted material.

### **Where to put the Quoted Material.**

If the quotation is short (most guides recommend three lines or fewer) you can embed the quoted material in the main body of your text. If you are quoting a specific page or paragraph of a source text, you must reference it with a page or line number.

Passolunghi and Siegel claim that 'children's mathematical difficulties are often explained in terms of working memory deficits' (Journal of Experimental Psychology, 88(4) pp348-367).

An embedded quotation should not stand alone as a complete sentence in the middle of your text.

If the quoted passage is longer, you will need to indent the quoted material.

In the course of the investigation, many of the subjects showed very clear and unexpected working memory profiles:

*Participant MH showed an extraordinary ability to remember nonsense words after very few trials. In this respect his working memory was functioning at a level well beyond the norm. This participant did, however, have huge problems with the visual-spatial tasks indicating a very specific cognitive impairment.*

(Memory in Everyday Life, p45)

### **When to quote and when not to.**

Avoid quoting for the sake of quoting; ensure that the quoted material does actually add to, illuminate, explain or illustrate the point you are making, or that it highlights a problem that you are going on to tackle.

In these examples, the quoted material adds nothing to the argument and should be avoided.

Antipholos invites the merchant to dine at 'my inn'.

Vincent's brain based theories have resulted from many years of studying 'cognitive processing' (Cognitive Psychology, p789).

If you use a direct quotation, you must include enough contextual and introductory material that your reader can make sense of the quotation. It is also highly important that the sentence including the embedded quotation makes sense as a whole. This can be a particular problem if the quoted material is from an ancient, old English source.

In both the examples, the quoted passages make sense on their own, but do not fit with the rest of the sentence to make a coherent and grammatically correct whole. In such cases you must **not** alter the quoted material to make it fit with the rest of your sentence.

Vincent stresses the importance of 'retrieval from long term memory is a vital cognitive skill that can be practiced by children from the age of three' (Cognitive Psychology, p789).

According to Vincent's clinical notes, his patient has 'problems often occur when he is recalling newly learned vocabulary from working memory, but he has a fully functioning long term memory' (Cognitive Psychology, p789).

Some rewording of the sentence surrounding the quoted material is needed to make the whole sentence make sense.

Vincent notes of one of his patients: 'problems often occur when he is recalling newly learned vocabulary from working memory, but he has a fully functioning long term memory' (Cognitive Psychology, p789).

It is utterly unacceptable to alter the language of the quoted material to make it fit with the form of the rest of your sentence.

Martin Luther King said that 'he had seen the promised land.' (Incorrect)

Martin Luther King said of himself: 'I have seen the promised land.' (Correct)

It is also unacceptable to quote selectively and so misrepresent the original material or to misattribute a quotation.

Original text: I found the film so awful, the fact that it was ever released is incredible.

Quotation: One critic said that he found 'the film ... incredible.'

Original text: Smith reported that a friend of his thought that all car drivers should be made to pay £50 a year to cyclists.

Quotation: Smith thinks that 'all car drivers should be made to pay £50 a year to cyclists.'

Quoted material should **not** be altered, even if it contains spelling or other errors. Errors in the quoted material can be indicated by inserting the word [*sic*] italicised and in square brackets after the error. You should, however, not use a quotation to highlight the grammatical or other shortcomings of the writer. If possible, arrange your own sentence so that the errors in the quoted material are not repeated.

## **Punctuating Quoted Material.**

There is some debate about whether embedded quotations should be in single or double quotation marks. Consistency is vital. The MLA style format recommends double quotation marks, as seen in the examples here.

According to Vincent, working memory is "the cognitive powerhouse, the central processing station of the brain" (Cognitive Psychology, p27).

If the quoted material contains some direct speech, the direct speech should be bounded by single speech marks.

Bottom thinks he would make a wonderful lion: "I will roar, that I will make the Duke say 'Let him roar again let him roar again!'" (Midsummer Night's Dream, I.ii.67-9).

Speeches from plays do not require quotation marks.

If there is a line break in the original verse that is being quoted, indicate it with a diagonal slash, and keep the original capitalisation.

Horatio tells Hamlet that the watchmen have seen "a figure like your father / Armed at point exactly, cap-à-pie" (Hamlet, I.ii.199-200).

There is no need to use quotation marks with indented quotations. The original punctuation, capitalisation and indentation of lines should be left exactly as they are in the original. The reference should be in brackets at the **right** hand side after the quotation. There is no punctuation mark after the reference.

The punctuation mark needed to introduce an embedded quotation will depend on the structure and flow of the sentence and the quotation. The quotation can be introduced with a colon (but never a semi-colon), a comma or nothing. Consider the following examples:

Hilary Clinton is keenly aware of the opportunities she has had: "My mother and grandmothers could never have lived my life; my father and grandfathers could never have imagined it" (Living History).

As the Bible says, "it is better to live on the corner of a roof than to share a house with a nagging wife" (Proverbs).

Moore believes that "dentists must have gotten together and decided that the real money was in root canals and a full set of X-rays every time you go in" (Hey Dude, Where's My Country).

Indented quotations also are often introduced with a colon.

The writer is often at pains to point out the many ways in which an ordinary experience can be made into a 'millionaire' experience:

*When you are on holiday, there is no need to be wealthy to feel like a millionaire. The trick is to know when to spend that little bit extra and to make the experience into something special and memorable. If you are looking out across the perfect calm of a Mediterranean sunset, use that £20 you kept back and have a nice bottle of wine. You will remember the moment for the rest of your life, and, for that moment, you are living like a millionaire.*

(How to Live Like a Millionaire of an Average Salary)

Sometimes your own introduction can lead straight into the quotation, which can begin in mid-sentence.

Comparing descriptions of funerals by H.G.Wells and by Dickens, E.M.Forster argues that they have

*... the same point of view and even use the same tricks of style ...*

*They are both humourists and visualisers who get an effect by cataloguing details and whisking the page over irritably.*

(Aspects of the Novel, p.33)

If strictly necessary you may use square brackets [ ] to add something to make a quotation clearer.

MacBeth says that "she [Lady MacBeth] should have died hereafter" (V.iii.16).

However, this is thought to be bad practice and should be avoided if possible. It is far better to change the form of your sentence to avoid the confusion that the square brackets might need to clear up.

MacBeth says of his wife, "she should have died hereafter"(V.iii.16).

If your own sentence continues on after the end of an embedded quotation, you should omit the final punctuation mark in the quotation unless it is an exclamation mark or a question mark that is important for the sense of the quoted material.

You should put a full stop after the reference so that it is not left hanging between two sentences.

As the Bible says, "it is better to live on the corner of a roof than to share a house with a nagging wife." (Proverbs) Many men would agree with these sentiments. (Incorrect)

As the Bible says, "it is better to live on the corner of a roof than to share a house with a nagging wife" (Proverbs). Many men would agree with these sentiments. (Correct)

An indented quotation should end with a full stop, question mark or exclamation mark if that is what the quoted passage ends with. If you have stopped quoting before the end of the original passage, you should use an ellipsis (...) to indicate you have not quoted the original in full. No punctuation is required after the reference for an indented quotation.

### **Other uses of quotation marks**

Quotation marks can be used to indicate short titles of songs, poems etc that would not normally stand alone.

Abba's finest hour was undoubtedly "Dancing Queen".

Note that the full stop here is outside the quotation marks. This is in line with Canadian convention which tends to be logical in its placing of punctuation marks.

What do you think of Abba's "Dancing Queen"?

## The Ellipsis ( ... )

There is usually no need to use the three dots (called an ellipsis) before and after a quotation, as almost all quotations are taken from a larger body of material. The ellipsis should be used when you leave out some material from the original in your quote. You will need to use some common sense and discretion in deciding when the omission is sufficient that the use of the ellipsis helps with understanding. It is not necessary to use it when quoting just a single word or phrase, especially in an embedded quote.

Although the quoted material here is clearly taken from a longer sentence, the beginning and end of which has been omitted, there is no need for an ellipsis.

Such a self-protection strategy is known as “cognitive distancing”.

You should use an ellipsis if you omit the beginning or end of a longer, indented quote.

Vincent claims that many stressed teachers employ

*... cognitive distancing. It is clearly a powerful psychological tool ... that makes perfect sense to stressed or mentally ill people.*

(Even More Cognitive Psychology p45)

Look at the Forster quote above for a good example of the correct use of the ellipsis.

An ellipsis can also be used to indicate a pause for thought, and can be especially useful in direct speech.

James considered the problem for several minutes ... and then spoke.

“I wonder ...” Steve said, “if the answer lies somewhere in that cave.”

## Other pitfalls and problems

In this section we will look at other pitfalls and problems that can occur in academic writing. Many of them concern verbs and their uses. We will also look at how the positioning of words in a sentence can have an effect on the meaning of the sentence and how to use numbers correctly in academic writing. There is a long section on conjunctions, words that join two parts of a sentence together. This is an area that many people find tricky, but with a little practice, it should present few problems.

## Conjunctions

This section will explain a little about what conjunctions are and how they should be used. Conjunctions are words or phrases that are used to join two independent clauses together.

Coordinating conjunctions are and/or/but/nor/as/for/so. When they are used to connect two independent clauses together they should be accompanied by a comma, which comes **before** the coordinating conjunction.

Some writers would argue that the comma itself is an adequate separation and would omit the comma in sentences where the two clauses are short and balanced. If in any doubt, I would use a comma as doing so cannot be wrong in this situation.

**AND** Of all the coordinating conjunctions, 'and' is the most common and the one where the use or otherwise of the comma is possibly most troublesome. The comma is needed if the 'and' is used to connect two independent clauses.

Paul went to Kenya for his holiday, and Steve went to Dorset.

Jim's mother washed the floor, and his dad just sat in front of the fire.

If, however it is used simply to connect two elements in the same clause or sentence, no comma is required.

Paul and Steve went to sunny Barrow in Furness on holiday this year.

He liked listening to rap and classical music.

**BUT** But requires a comma when acting as a coordinating conjunction, connecting two independent clauses.

The weather was fine on Sunday, but we chose to stay in and watch TV.

Jim's wife was a fine cook, but her pastry always tasted like clay.

When used to connect two ideas with the idea of 'with the exception of', no comma is needed.

Everybody but Jim got a new pencil.

It seemed like cake was given to everyone but me.

**OR** Again, a comma is required when or is used to separate two independent clauses.

I can cook something special tonight, or Jim can zoom down to the fish and chip shop.

Sharon can get you a ticket to the concert, or Suzie could take you to that new fish and chip shop.

If it is used to separate two elements in the same sentence, no comma is needed.

You can have fish or chicken.

Paul decided he wasn't that keen on Kenya or Dorset.

**SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS** As well as the coordinating conjunctions noted and explained above, there is a whole raft of subordinating conjunctions. Some of them are:

|             |               |          |
|-------------|---------------|----------|
| after       | if            | though   |
| although    | if only       | till     |
| as          | in order that | unless   |
| as if       | now that      | until    |
| as long as  | once          | when     |
| as though   | rather than   | whenever |
| because     | since         | where    |
| before      | so that       | whereas  |
| even if     | than          | wherever |
| even though | that          | while    |

Using these will make one of the two clauses in a sentence dependent on (or subordinate to) the other (main) clause. When these are used to separate two clauses (a main clause and a dependent or subordinate clause), no comma is needed:

The cyclist fell off her bike because the road was icy.

You cannot have any chocolate crumble unless you finish your main course.

However, if the dependent (or subordinate clause) is put first in the sentence, it must be offset with a comma.

Because the road was icy, the cyclist fell off her bike.

Unless you finish your main course, you cannot have any chocolate crumble.

**HOWEVER** Here might be a good place to mention the word 'however'. Two independent clauses can be connected by coordinating conjunctions (with a comma) but **cannot** be connected by the word however. Using the word 'however' to connect two independent clauses is a common mistake.

Paul decided to go to Kenya, and Steve went to Dorset. (Correct)

Paul decided to go to Kenya, but Steve went to Dorset. (Correct)

Paul decided to go to Kenya, however Steve went to Dorset. (Incorrect)

In the example above, it would be better to make the two clauses into separate sentences.

Paul decided to go to Kenya. Steve, however, went to Dorset.

You can use 'however' to express contrast. It is usually offset with a comma.

There was, however, no chance of any cricket being played on Wednesday.

She, however, was a truly awful cook.

My culinary skills are, however, second to none.

## Split infinitives.

The **infinitive** of a verb is the form given in the dictionary where no specific subject is indicated. In English it is always characterised by the word 'to':

e.g. to work, to pay, to eat, to find, to inhabit, to bribe...

A 'split infinitive' occurs when the 'to' is separated from its verb by other words. The most famous split infinitive comes at the beginning of every episode of Star Trek, when the crew's continuing mission is announced as: "to boldly go" (rather than "to go boldly").

Split infinitives have, traditionally, been regarded by some commentators as anathema, something to be avoided at all costs. There is no rational basis for this rule; splitting infinitives is commonplace in spoken language, and even in written English it may be clearer or more elegant to do so.

In general, however, **split infinitives should be avoided in the formal register of an essay or other piece of academic writing**, unless the alternative seems excessively awkward or clumsy. Usually it is sufficient to move the offending word so that it comes either before or after the infinitive.

Harry's teacher told him **to** never **look** back.

Harry's teacher told him never **to look** back.

She told me I had **to** quickly **finish** this sandwich.

She told me I had **to finish** this sandwich quickly.

I thought it best **to** quietly **sneak** away from the accident.

I thought it best **to sneak** away from the accident quietly.

I was told **to** always **pay** attention in class.

I was told always **to pay** attention in class.

There are occasions when splitting the infinitive is far clearer than any alternative phrasing:

That was the only way to more than double his salary.

## Subject/Verb Agreement.

We usually do not have to think about making the verb agree with its subject. We would not write

She give the biscuits to her daughter.

I gives the biscuits to my daughter.

There are, however, instances where it is possible to mismatch the verb and the subject without it sounding as disjointed as the above examples do.

### **Plural subject, singular verb.**

In this sentence, careful planning and a clear mind are the subject of the verb and as they are plural the verb has to be plural: are rather than is.

Careful planning and a clear mind **is** important for writing a good essay. (Incorrect)

Careful planning and a clear mind **are** important for writing a good essay. (Correct)

You need to be careful in situations where the subject is a list of things, the last of which is a singular item. In such cases, the whole list of different items forms the subject and therefore needs a plural verb

Warships, yachts, dinghies and a huge aircraft carrier **is** out on the harbour. (Incorrect)

Warships, yachts, dinghies and a huge aircraft carrier **are** out on the harbour. (Correct)

.

### **Singular subject plural verb.**

The subject in this sentence is 'Tim's collection', which is singular. It therefore needs a singular verb: 'was' rather than 'were'.

Tim's collection of bottles **was** fantastic. (Correct)

Tim's collection of bottles **were** fantastic. (Incorrect)

Problems are particularly likely to occur with collective nouns such as a herd of, a collection of, a group of, a flock of, etc. All these are singular.

In this example, the subject is 'a small group of birds', which is singular (even though there are lots of birds) and needs a singular verb: was.

A small group of birds **were** flying across the midnight sea. (Incorrect)

A small group of birds **was** flying across the midnight sea. (Correct)

An enormous herd of zebras **was** thundering towards us. (Correct)

An enormous herd of zebras **were** thundering towards us. (Incorrect)

Take care with 'each', which is also singular and therefore needs a singular verb.

Each of these bottles **are** cracked. (Incorrect)

Each of these bottles **is** cracked. (Correct)

You also need to watch out when other phrases are added between the subject and its verb.

In this sentence the subject is my best friend, which is singular and so needs a singular verb 'is moving' rather than 'are moving'.

My best friend, along with all his family and pets, **is** moving to Australia. (Correct)

My best friend, along with all his family and pets, **are** moving to Australia. (Incorrect)

My best friend, all his family and pets, **are** moving to Australia. (Correct)

Either and neither can also cause problems. They are both singular and need a singular verb.

Neither of you **is** going to the cinema this evening. (Correct)

Neither of you **are** going to the cinema this evening. (Incorrect)

Either Spain or Portugal **seems** like a good place for a holiday. (Correct)

Either Spain or Portugal **seem** like a good place for a holiday. (Incorrect)

It seems that none can be treated as either singular or plural.

None of my friends **speak** German. (Correct)

None of my friends **speaks** German. (Correct)

None of the bottles **was** cracked. (Correct)

None of the bottles **were** cracked. (Correct)

## Dangling Participles

Dangling participles (also known as dangling modifiers) sound more painful than they actually are.

Consider the following sentences all of which contain dangling participles or dangling modifiers.

In the sentence below, the modifying clause (Rushing to catch the bus) contains a participle (rushing). The participle is said to be dangling because the subject of the main clause (Bob's wallet) is not the thing modified by the initial modifying clause. It was not Bob's wallet that was rushing.

Rushing to catch the bus, Bob's wallet fell out of his pocket.

The modifying clause (flying south for the winter) does not modify the subject of the sentence (I). I was not flying south, the birds were.

Flying south for the winter, I saw a huge flock of swallows.

The modifier (Falling through thin ice) does not refer to the subject of the sentence (the jogger). The jogger was not falling through the ice, the dog was.

Falling through the thin ice, the jogger dived into the lake to save the dog.

The modifier refers to Janet and not to (we) the subject of the sentence. We are not driven to drink by her problems, Janet is.

Driven to drink by her problems, we see how Janet will come to a sticky end.

It is easy to fall into the trap of having dangling participles (modifiers) in your work. They are not corrected by computer grammar checkers and can be easily overlooked. The more you look at examples of dangling participles, the more you will be able to spot them and remove them from your own writing.

## Consistency of Tense.

A common mistake is to change tense in the middle of a sentence or paragraph.

I **was** quite surprised how well I **feel**. (Past tense becomes present.)

She fully **intended** to do her homework but she **forgets** and **goes** out with her mates.  
(Past tense becomes present.)

Tim **wants** to get a job but he **didn't** know what to do about it. (Present tense becomes past.)

When you are recounting the plot of a play or other literary work, you should use the **present** tense.

At this point Japhy and Ray **decide** to climb a mountain in the High Sierras. They **spend** a night under the stars, and Japhy **cooks** a fantastic chocolate pudding, which **cools** in the snow.

Be careful not to slip into the past tense.

At this point Japhy and Ray **decide** to climb a mountain in the High Sierras. They **spend** a night under the stars, and Japhy **cooked** a fantastic chocolate pudding, which **cooled** in the snow.

It might be necessary to use the past tense (perfect tense) when a chronological sequence of events is involved.

Once Japhy and Ray have packed the car, they are able to set off for the mountains.

## The Subjunctive.

If you have learned a foreign language such as French, German or Spanish you may well have had to do battle with the subjunctive. It is little used in English but worth getting to grips with nonetheless.

The subjunctive mood, as it is known, is used to indicate a hypothetical or speculative situation:

In the following examples the subjunctive is given in brackets:

If only I was [*were*] rich, I would be able to afford to buy a house.

I would like him better if he was [*were*] more sociable.

If the weather was [*were*] better, we would be in a better mood.

If the 'if' clause is simply reporting a factual situation, there is no need for the subjunctive.

If the weather had been better, we would have enjoyed our holiday better.

The subjunctive is also used after verbs indicating obligation, requirement or compulsion. The word 'that' in such situations often hints at the need for the subjunctive:

It is important that these new facts are [*be*] taken into consideration.

The government has rejected calls that it amends [*amend*] the law.

The coach insisted that the new player plays [*play*] in the team's opening match.

The boss demanded that we are [*be*] back in the office by one o'clock.

The P.M requested that the minister uses [*use*] plain English.

The subjunctive is quite tricky, partly because it is so little used and therefore very little taught in English. As it is often not used in situations where it is necessary, sentences, which require the subjunctive, can sound perfectly correct without it.

## Using Numbers.

When using numbers in essays and reports, it is important to decide whether to write the number out in full (two hundred thousand four hundred and six) or to use numerals (200,406).

There are some rules to follow to make sure you use numbers in the right way.

Use words if the number can be written in two words or fewer. Remember that some words require a hyphen (twenty-six, thirty-nine). Some guides recommend that numbers up to nine should be written in words, and those over nine written using numerals.

You should use numerals if the number modifies a unit of measurement, time or proportion (5 minutes, 8 kilograms, 54 mph). Abbreviations of units of measure should always be in the singular. (8 kg, 17cm, 12,900 km)

I live at number **forty-eight**.

I thought there were **nine** biscuits left in the tin?

My new car does **0-60** mph in just over **12** minutes.

She broke the long jump record by **17** centimetres.

The prize marrow weighed over **67** kg.

Numerals should be used for all larger numbers although the context might determine the precise usage. In technical writing such numbers should always be written using numerals. If the number is less precise, it may be possible to write the number in words.

The rock sample measured **17.74** grams when dried.

The lower attaining maths group's mean score was **88.6**, with a standard deviation of **14.3**.

There are over **thirty million** people living in Mexico City.

Florida contains **several thousand** disenfranchised voters.

Numerals should always be used for decimals and fractions (7.625, 1/4 in, 1/2 a pint, 0.75) unless the figures are vague (...half the voters in the country..., ...two thirds of the population cannot use a colon correctly.)

Following the drying process, **1/2** a gram of copper sulphate was added.

Students spend more than **half** their disposable income on baked beans.

She beat the world pole-vault record by **1/4** cm.

Nearly **a quarter** of the world's population survives on less than a pound a day.

Place a hyphen after a unit of measure when the unit modifies a noun: 10-foot pole, 6-inch rule, 3-year-old horse.

He tried to retrieve the lost bottle with a **5-foot** stick.

I teach a class of angelic **7-year-old** children.

The thief was unable to scale the **12-metre** fence.

He was delighted with his **78-kg** prize marrow.

There are occasions where combining written numbers and numerals will clear up possible confusion. Where you have two numbers running together, write the shorter one out in words and use numerals for the longer one.

I have a lovely class of **32**seven-year-old children.

We need another **12**five-litre bottles.

The thief made off with *twenty***1000**-dollar bills.

He counted out **200** *fifty*-pence pieces.

You should avoid beginning a sentence with a number that is not written out. If a sentence begins with a year, write 'The year' before writing out the year in numbers.

**One hundred and seventeen** protests were lodged with the ombudsman.

**Six hundred and thirty-five** nuggets were discovered in the first day of the gold rush.

**The year 1849** saw the great gold rush in California.

You should always use numerals in the following situations:

With dates. Monday **20** April, 1968.

I will arrive on Tuesday **17** May, 2004.

They are due back from their holiday on Monday **23** June.

With fractions, decimals and percentages. The word 'percent' should be written out in words unless it is part of a technical report, in which case it is fine to use the mathematical symbol (%).

You will need to add **1/2** a teaspoon of treacle.

More than **20** percent of students admit to spending more on pot noodles than on books.

The IQ scores of the children in the control group increased by **25.75** points.

With money. The only exception to this is when the amounts are vague. In such cases it is fine to write the numbers out in words.

The concert tickets cost £ **27.50** each.

Consumers spend over £ **6 million** a year on cous-cous.

Global ice-cream sales exceeded \$ **1.2 million** last month.

With times. Again, if timings are vague it is fine to write them out in words.

The plane from Bombay will arrive at **16:45**.

I'll see you at around half past **seven**.

The early morning bus arrived at **05:10** on the dot.

We left the pub at around **eight** o'clock and got home at around **nine**.

## Positioning of 'only' and 'often'.

It is important to be careful with the position of 'only' and 'often'. If it is positioned carelessly, its meaning can be ambiguous.

The following sentence is ambiguous.

Students who go to the pub often can get worse grades.

This could mean either of the following:

Students who **often** go to the pub can get worse grades.

Students who go to the pub can **often** get worse grades.

This sentence is also ambiguous.

The women who protested at Greenham Common often would sleep in tents.

This could mean either of the following:

The women who **often** protested at Greenham Common would sleep in tents.

The women who protested at Greenham Common would **often** sleep in tents.

The same problem can occur with only.

The students who went to the pub only found warm beer.

This could mean either of the following:

The students who **only** went to the pub found warm beer.

The students who went to the pub found **only** warm beer.

Take care when using these little words that can pop up at different places in sentences. While the meaning of the sentence may be obvious to you, it may well be ambiguous to your reader.

## Compound Words

We have many words that have grown from the merging of two words. Some have changed over time and merged into a single word.

keyboard, classroom, childlike, redhead, drawbridge, football, paperwork, stepfather

Some require a hyphen.

washing-up, daughter-in-law, e-mail, master-butcher, six-pack, school-run, head-lamp ...

Others seem to work well as separate words:

post office, job centre, vice president, middle classes, fuel tank, car park ...

There is no foolproof way of knowing whether a compound is a single word, needs a hyphen or will stand as two separate words. The computer grammar checker will help and so will a good dictionary (many available on-line). In some instances, there seems to be no universally accepted way of writing the word.

For example, semicolon and semi-colon both seem to be acceptable.

## Style

This section is slightly different from the preceding grammar section. It is less to do with the 'nuts and bolts' of the language and more to do with writing style. It is possible to write in a way that is grammatically correct, but clumsy or unconvincing.

By working through the following pages, you will not only avoid some of the common traps that can spoil your writing style, you will also hear about ways of improving your writing style. A good writing style is a hugely useful life skill, both at university and onward into professional life.

## Run-on sentences.

Run-on sentences are grammatically incorrect; they read very badly and should be rooted out from your writing. Unfortunately computer grammar checkers are not good at identifying them. Grammar checkers will identify the comma splice (two independent clauses separated by a comma) but seem quite happy if there is no punctuation between the clauses.

A run-on sentence is really two sentences that should be separated by some kind of punctuation mark but are not.

Below are some examples of run-on sentences. Although they look very clumsy when seen in isolation like this, it is easy to get carried away when writing an essay and end up with run-on sentences.

She only rings me at certain times she just wants to make herself feel better.

I rushed out to the shop I had no milk left.

The professor ran to his office he had just had a brilliant idea.

If you find that your sentences are long and each contains more than one idea, you will need to find a way of separating the ideas. You could simply use a full stop. A semi-colon might make the connection between the ideas clearer. You could connect the two clauses with a conjunction of some kind.

I rushed out to the shop. I had no milk left.

I rushed out to the shop; I had no milk left. (The connection between the two clauses is implied but not explicitly stated.)

I rushed out to the shop because I had no milk left.

I rushed out to the shop, as I had no milk left.

There is **no substitute** for proof reading your writing to eliminate run on sentences.

## Pleonasm.

Although this sounds like a nasty medical complaint, it is in fact a barrier to a good writing style.

A pleonasm occurs when unnecessary or redundant words are used. They simply add bulk to a sentence without adding any extra content. Below are some examples of sentences containing a pleonasm. The redundant words have been highlighted. Omitting these words simply makes the sentences more concise.

Jill saw the building burning down **with her own eyes**. (She must have seen it with her own eyes.)

The vote was **completely and totally** unanimous. (A unanimous vote cannot be anything but complete and total.)

She **herself** had written her autobiography **of her own life** in just two weeks. (She must have written her autobiography, by definition. The biography must have been of her life.)

Tim and his friends decided to co-operate **together** on their project. (Co-operating involves working together, by definition).

It was his **usual, habitual** custom to have a bacon sandwich for breakfast. (A custom is always usual and habitual.)

There are lists of common pleonasms on line. One such list can be found at

<http://www.wordexplorations.com/pleonasm.html>

While reading such lists is quite entertaining, it is impossible to remember all the different traps you could fall into. As with many aspects of good style, there is no substitute for rigorous proof reading.

## Paragraph Length.

There is no set length for a paragraph. It is possible, however, to have your paragraphs too long or too short. There are some guiding principles that will help you to get your paragraphs right.

The entire paragraph should concern itself with a single focus. If it begins with a one focus or major point of discussion, it should not end with another or wander within different ideas. This is one reason why paragraphs can become over-long. More will be said later about maintaining focus in your writing.

A paragraph should usually begin with an introductory sentence, which sets out the subject of that paragraph. The remainder of the paragraph should go on to explain and 'unpack' that initial sentence. If you find that you are writing about something different from your initial sentence, your paragraph is probably too long and your focus has wandered.

If you find that your paragraphs are too long:

Consider splitting a single long paragraph into two shorter ones. It is perfectly acceptable to begin a paragraph with a sentence connecting it to the previous paragraph.

Try to organise your writing so that your ideas are developed logically and sequentially. If you find that a paragraph contains more than one idea, you may need to reorganise your essay so that your ideas are developed more logically.

Look at the other paragraphs in your essay. Paragraphs should all be of roughly similar length. If you find that you have one or two paragraphs that are much longer than all the others, read them carefully and try to find out why.

If a paragraph is too short, it may be because the initial idea has not been developed sufficiently. To some extent, the level of development is dependent on the writer's purpose and the overall length of the essay. However, you should beware of paragraphs of only two or three sentences. Read them carefully and consider if your idea has been sufficiently developed.

If you think that an idea requires further development, consider some of the following strategies:

Use examples and illustrations

Cite data (facts, statistics, evidence, details, and others)

Examine testimony (what other people say such as quotes and paraphrases)

Use an anecdote or story

Define terms in the paragraph

Compare and contrast

Evaluate causes and reasons

Examine effects and consequences.

## Straying Off The Point.

Inclusion of irrelevant and unnecessary information can cause paragraphs to become over long and to lose focus. Such irrelevant information will cause your argument to lose force. Your reader will lose interest and the main thrust of your argument will be buried.

In the paragraph below, the irrelevant information is italicised. By removing the information there would be more space for relevant information.

Tim loves to go to India. He tries to go at least once a year. *Last year he took his new rucksack, which is blue and white.* His love of the country began during his first visit when he was seduced by the exotic sounds and smells. *These days it is possible to buy a lot of exotic fruit, that has to be flown into the country in our supermarkets.* He particularly enjoys travelling around the country's rail network where you get to see real Indian life. *The trains in England are faster and cleaner but nowhere near as much fun.* His favourite place in India is the Rajasthani desert, a beautiful landscape in the west of the country. *Camels are found all over the desert and are often known as ships of the desert.* Tim tries to go on a camel trek whenever he visits Rajasthan. *Camels can be temperamental creatures and rather smelly too.*

Below is a corrected version of the above paragraph with the irrelevant information removed.

Tim loves to go to India. He tries to go at least once a year. His love of the country began during his first visit when he was seduced by the exotic sounds and smells. He particularly enjoys travelling around the country's rail network where you get to see real Indian life. His favourite place in India is the Rajasthani desert, a beautiful landscape in the west of the country. Tim tries to go on a camel trek whenever he visits Rajasthan.

