# Grammar, spelling and punctuation

## Sentences

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

Complete sentence: The doctor saw the patient.  
Incomplete sentence: Seeing the patient.

‘Seeing the patient’ is a sentence ‘fragment’. These are extremely common in spoken English, so they soundokay. But watch out for sentence fragments in formal written academic assignments.

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

The doctor (subject) saw the patient (predicate)

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

The doctor (subject) saw (verb) the patient (object).

This may not be a very interesting sentence but it is a complete sentence. Sentences in academic books and journals can be quite complex, made up of one or more subordinate clauses joined in various ways, including conjunctions or relative pronouns or linked through punctuation (please see below for more on each of these topics). The basic rule remains the same, however: one complete idea, one complete sentence.

## Paragraph

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

‘The doctor saw a patient who was extremely anxious. In order to put the patient at ease the doctor sat them down and asked questions very quietly. It was at that point that the doctor noticed the patient was struggling to speak, either there was something happening with brain function or there was some sort of injury to the person’s jaw. It was clear to the doctor, however, that the patient would need a thorough examination and some medical treatment in hospital’.

## Syntax

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

‘The doctor saw the patient’ is different from ‘The patient saw the doctor’

Although these two sentences consist of the same words, the different order creates a very different meaning. The first example is about what the doctor saw, whereas the second example is about what the patient saw.

Syntax is about paying attention to word order (and therefore sentence-meaning). This can be particularly difficult for people who use English as a second language – partly because most speakers of any language usually learn basic syntax as they grow up surrounded by the language, and partly because other languages have other ways of indicating meaning. Word order in ancient Greek, for example, was largely irrelevant – other aspects of grammar made the meaning perfectly clear.

This is not the case in English. Word order is crucial for clarity, accuracy and meaning. The rules of syntax are notoriously complex in English, so please be careful.  Make sure your sentences make sense, and that they mean what you want them to mean.

## Things to avoid in sentences

It is best to avoid beginning sentences with certain linking words, for example, ‘which’, ‘while/whilst’, ‘whereas’, ‘although’, as well as ‘and’ or ‘but’.

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

**Example 1.** ‘Communication skills can be improved in different ways. For example, role-play provides a means of doing this’.  
**Example 2**. ‘Communication skills can be improved in different ways. For example, through role-play’.

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

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

## Nouns

Nouns are labellingwords – they name people, animals, places and concepts etc. They can be singular or plural, such as science/sciences, or theatre/theatres.

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

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

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

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

An athlete is needed for the race.  
The athlete is needed for the race.

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

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

*‘*Students are an asset to modern society’ is good English.  
‘Mechanic repairs car’is not. It should be ‘The mechanic repairs the car’.

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

“The student gave me his book”, not “The student gave me the student’s book.”  
“That pen belongs to Sara. It is hers”, not “That pen belongs to Sara. It is Sara’s.”

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

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

## Adjectives

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

‘They have interesting jobs’.  
‘Their jobs are interesting’.  
‘Examinations are challenging’.

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

## Verbs

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

They are writing. (action)  
He went out. (action)  
I will be ready soon. (action)  
They are early. (state)  
She got wet. (state)

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

Active means that the subject does the action.  
Passive means that the action is done to the subject.

For example:

‘The lorry sweeps the road’ is active

This is because ‘the lorry’ is the subjectof the sentence AND the lorry does the action (sweeps the road).

‘The lorry was washed’ is passive

‘The lorry’ is still the subject in this sentence, but in this case the action of the verb (washing) is doneto the subject – so it is passive.

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

Always make sure that the sentences in your essays make sense.

## Split infinitives

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

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

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

## Adverbs

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

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

They strongly agreed.  
He is usually late.  
She works fast.  
They work here.

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

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

‘The boy done good’ is (doubly!) incorrect.  
It should be: ‘The boy did well’.

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

## Prepositions

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

‘The book is on the table, not in my bag’.  
‘Please arrive before nine or after eleven’.

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

result in  
keen on  
impatient with

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

## Sentence endings

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

‘I liked the company which/that I was working for’.  
‘She was inspired by the scientists whom/that she worked with’.  
‘I don’t know about the theory which/that he is referring to’.

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

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

You should try to make sure that you do not end sentences with ‘with’ or ‘for’, or any other ‘hanging preposition’.

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

So, the sentences above might be rewritten:

‘I liked the company for which I was working’.  
‘She was inspired by the scientists with whom she worked’.  
‘I don’t know about the theory to which he is referring’.

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

## Conjunctions

Conjunctions are linking words which join groups of words and sentences. If you do not use enough of them, your sentences will seem abrupt. Here are some examples of conjunctions:  
  
‘He felt motivated because his results had improved’.  
‘I was tired but I continued to work and I started to make mistakes.  
‘Due to the fact that the weather is worsening, classes will finish earlier’.  
‘However, lessons will resume tomorrow’.  
  
Notice that in the first two sentences, the conjunction links two ideas in a particular relationship. In the third sentence, the same is true, but the conjunction is at the beginning of the sentence. In the last sentence, ‘however’ links with the previous sentence.

Conjunctions can thus link both within and between sentences.

## Subordinate clauses

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

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

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

‘The lecturer marked the essay, which was very long’*.*  
  
Which is a relative pronoun. Other commonly used relative pronouns include: who, whom, whose, that and so on.

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

The grammatical rules for using relative pronouns can get complicated, especially when the ideas being joined relate to people rather than things. So:  
The lecturer congratulated the student. The lecturer was a kind and thoughtful person.  
  
This can be joined using the relative pronoun who:

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

BUT be careful! Consider the following two sentences:

‘The student was pleased. The lecturer congratulated the student’.  
  
In this case, the relative pronoun is whom rather than who:

The student, whom the lecturer congratulated, was pleased.  
  
The basic rule is that you use who when the person concerned is the subject of the subordinate clause and whom when the person is the object of the subordinate clause. Note that the important point is the subordinate clause.  
  
Sentence 1: ‘The student (subject) was pleased’.  
Sentence 2: ‘The lecturer (subject) congratulated the student (object)’.

## Spelling

Spelling is important for exactly the same reason that grammar and punctuation are important: poor spelling makes for poor communication. Academic writing requires a high degree of accuracy, and this is reflected in the quality of the writing. Sloppy spelling gives the impression that you don’t care about the assignment. It is worth noting that English spelling is inconsistent, therefore always use a dictionary or the spell-check built into most word processing software.

**Words to watch**

To, too  
To is used with the infinitive (to watch, to run, etc.) or with an indirect object (I gave the book to the student) or as a preposition (The Manager ran to the Fire Exit)  
Too is an adverb – it adds information to a verb: ‘that athlete was too slow to win the race’. In addition, it can be used in the sense of also: ‘The teacher, too, was puzzled by this suggestion’.

Their, there, they’re  
Their is a possessive form (something belonging to ‘them’)  
There is an adverb, indicating location (over there)  
They’re is a contraction of ‘they are’

It’s, its  
It’s is a contraction of ‘it is’  
Its is a possessive pronoun (it belongs to it: its properties, etc.)

Accept, except  
Accept is a verb, meaning to receive something (I accept that gift, they accepted this idea)  
Except can be a verb, except it is often used as a preposition meaning ‘but’ (I would accept that idea, except it is wrong….)

Affect, effect  
Affect is a verb meaning to influence (Holiday arrangements have been badly affected by the weather conditions)  
Effect is the outcome of a chain of events (cause and effect)

**Some odd spelling rules**

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

Dropping the ‘e’  
Words ending in ‘e’ often lose the ‘e’ when a suffix (the ending which is added to a word) begins with a vowel or when a ‘y’ is added. For example:  
*desire + able = desirable  
criticise + ing = criticising  
advise + ory = advisory  
educate + ion = education  
arrive + al = arrival  
close + ure = closure  
noise + y = noisy*

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

*like + able = likeable  
stripe + y = stripey*

The ‘e’ is also kept when the suffix begins with a consonant, as in -ness, -ly, -ment, -ful, -less etc. For example:  
*sincere + ly = sincerely  
late + ly = lately  
polite + ness = politeness  
place + ment = placement  
complete + ly = completely  
blame + less = blameless*

But (of course!), there are also exceptions to this rule. In some cases, the ‘e’ is dropped before the consonantal suffix. For example:  
argue + ment = argument  
wise + dom = wisdom  
true + th = truth  
true + ly = truly  
nine + th = ninth

**Punctuation**

Punctuation is simply a series of conventions that make it easier for readers to follow your train of thought. A complete sentence (one thought or idea) is indicated by a full stop (.). A pause in the flow of thought, for example, to allow additional information, is indicated by a comma (,). A semi-colon (;) is used to indicate a fuller pause than a comma, but not the final end of the sentence. A colon (:) is used to indicate the beginning of a list. Apostrophes (‘) have several uses: to indicate that letters have been left out of a word. Capital letters have several uses: to indicate the beginning of a sentence by starting the word with a capital letter; but also to distinguish titles and proper nouns (the Bible, the Act of Parliament etc) from ordinary text.

**Full Stops**

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

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

**Commas**

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

The main function of the comma is to:

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

* Break up parts of longer sentences - for example:

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

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

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

In this case, a pair of ideas is linked by the word ‘and’, no pausing occurs in speech, and no punctuation (i.e. comma) is needed to clarify the meaning.

Present items in a list. For example:  
I would like to watch the video, take notes and then be ready to ask questions.

* Divide words which refer to the subject of a sentence. For example: ‘The President of the Society, Julie Jones, received a standing ovation after her speech’.
* Punctuate certain relative clauses (i.e. parts of a sentence beginning with ‘who’, ‘which’, or ‘whose’). For example: ‘The College, which is situated in the centre of Canterbury, has an excellent academic reputation’.

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

A comma is not always used with words like ‘who’ or ‘which’. Consider the following example:  
‘I like lecturers who give high grades for my work’.

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

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

**Colons and Semi-colons**

Colons should be used only:

* To introduce a list. For example:  
  ‘An essay usually includes the following components: an introduction, a main body of text and a conclusion’.
* To show a link between the units of meaning, like a hinge. For example:  
  ‘The results of the referendum were very clear: there was a need for a change in policy’.
* Semi-colons are extremely useful in long sentences but be careful not to over-use them. They are typically used as follows:  
  ‘In the library there were several students reading journal articles; a couple of lecturers checking the stock, and a librarian returning books to the shelves’.
* To provide a break in a sentence, while showing the relationship between the two parts. For example:  
  ‘Night was falling; he knew all was lost’*.*
* To express an idea which is too short to merit a new sentence. For example:  
  ‘Wherever possible, students should try to organise their academic work by using ‘planning tools’; these can help to clarify ideas’.

In some cases, semi-colons are followed by linking words, as in:  
‘They were unsure about the outcome of the assignment they were about to undertake; nevertheless, they would try their best’.

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

**Apostrophes**

Incorrect use of the apostrophe in students’ writing is a very common mistake and can alter meaning. Apostrophes should be used:

* When letters have been left out of a word. For example:  
  ‘The library’s still open’. (meaning “The library is still open.”)  
  ‘It won’t be necessary’. (meaning “It will not be necessary.”)
* To show possession (belonging to). For example:  
  ‘Einstein’s theory’ (meaning “The theory of Einstein”)

When you are using an apostrophe to show possession, then the position of the apostrophe depends on whether you have a singular or plural noun to denote the possessor. In these examples, the apostrophe is attached to a singular noun:

‘That pen is Simon’s’‘Jasmine’s examination papers’

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

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

If the relevant noun is in the plural, the apostrophe is placed after the ‘s’:

‘The students’ belongings …’  
‘Psychologists’ theories have suggested …’

Exceptions:

* Some words have unusual plural forms, such as children (plural of child), women (plural of woman). In these cases, because the plural is different from the singular, the apostrophe goes in the singular position, before the ‘s’. e.g:  
  ‘The children’s party …’ (not childrens’....)  
  ‘The women’s meeting …’(not womens’...)
* The really confusing exception is it....

It only takes an apostrophe to show a missing letter. For example:  
‘It’s a shame’ (meaning “It is a shame.”).

The possessive form of ‘it’ is ‘its’ NOT ‘it’s’. The possessive of ‘it’ DOES NOT need an apostrophe....  
‘The company was falsely accused of maladministration. Its response was to threaten to sue’.

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

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

If you need help or advice with any issue raised in this study guide, please book an appointment with the Skills for Academic Success team (S.A.S.).

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