Grammar & Punctuation

Grammar is really important at university.

Grammar and punctuation rules exist to ensure other people understand what you say. Most people dislike grammar, and very few really know all the rules. English grammar is less complex than many other languages because it is fairly flexible. There are often different ways you can arrange a sentence yet keep the same meaning. However, this flexibility can be a problem. The flexibility of English means you can use weird sentence structures or punctuation, yet people will still understand you. As a result many people arrive at university with poor grammar which has got them by until now. However, at university-level, you are expected to use grammar properly, and will be marked accordingly. The quality of your grammar is expected to rise as you progress through the years. At post-graduate level, your grammar is expected to be absolutely perfect.

This is not a guide on English Grammar. There are many good books and websites which will cover the topic comprehensively.

Sooner or later you will need to check a rule. Be aware that US rules are sometimes different from the rest of the English-language world. Do not follow US rules. Follow the rules of International English or UK English. If in doubt, use an Oxford publication, such as the Standard Oxford English Dictionary or the Oxford Living English Dictionary (https://en.oxforddictionaries.com).

The secret to learning grammar:

Don’t try. If you were really interested in grammar, you would have learned it by now. It’s too late, and too time consuming, to learn all the rules of English grammar in time to apply to your current work.

Learn rules as you need them. If you’re unsure about something, look it up online. Don’t guess. If you get it wrong your marks will suffer. No one will give you marks for “effort” – get it right or lose marks.

Don’t let the computer do it for you:

Grammar-checking software is no substitute for your own knowledge because it is not very good. It does not understand context, cannot know all the rules of grammar, and is rarely very accurate. The most accurate grammar checking software misses 40% of errors, while most others miss 75%. In other words, most grammar-checking software is wrong most of the time.

Common Grammar Issues

This section covers the errors people make most often and the questions which are most frequently asked in the university’s Writing Centre.

Be consistent

However you write, be consistent. If you are unsure what the rule is, look it up. If you are still unsure, decide what your rule is and stick to it. If you change how you write within your document, you give the impression you weren’t thinking when you were writing and that you never checked your work before handing it in. You will be marked down for that. If you make a mistake, but do it consistently, people will simply assume you had learned the wrong rule. You will be corrected, but your marks are unlikely to suffer.

Being marked down for style issues

The person marking your work may have learned English in another country. Some other languages have rigid rules where English is flexible. In some countries a style of writing English which is optional, and which has legitimate alternatives, is taught as if the version taught is the only permitted way to do it. This means you may get marked down for stylistic decisions which are actually legitimate because the person marking your work does not realise their “rule” is just a style. If you suspect this is the case, you will have to research your usage and provide evidence, then discuss this with the person who marked your work. Most people will revise their marking if you show evidence.

‘I’ vs ‘we’
The most common issue of this type is the use of ‘I’ and ‘we.’ Some countries, such as Germany, teach that you can never use ‘I’ in academic writing. Some teach you can never say ‘we.’ However, both are allowed in academic writing in English, so if you get marked down for using one style, you can appeal. If you want to avoid the issue, use ‘one’ or rephrase the sentence.

All of the following are legitimate and have exactly the same meaning:

- I conclude this argument is poor.
- We conclude this argument is poor.
- One concludes this argument is poor.
- It can be concluded that this argument is poor.
- It is reasonable to conclude this is a poor argument.

**Apostrophes:**

Apostrophes are used for:

1. Possession (eg: David’s car; this is the people’s decision)
2. Plural of letters (eg: he got two A’s in his exams; she has two B.A.’s)
3. To stand for missing letters in contractions (eg: isn’t).
4. To show you are discussing the word, not what it refers to (eg: children are called ‘kids’).

**Apostrophes when the word ends in “s”:**

Words can end in ‘s’ because they are plural (eg: cars) or because the word or name ends in ‘s’ (eg: the United States, Thomas).

1. **Possessive plurals** - Put the apostrophe after the word (eg: the many cars’ passengers)
2. **Names ending in ‘s’** – there is no single rule. There are different, competing rules on what to do in order to show plural or possessive on names ending in ‘s’. Some citation style guides have rules on this, such as APA. Some publishers have their own rules. In other cases, it is up to the writer. Most guides will provide a single rule and won’t tell you alternatives are allowed, giving a false impression there is a single correct rule. Both of the following are legitimate:
   - Thomas’s car
   - Thomas’ car
3. As a consequence, you need to do the following:
   - Check the citation style guide from the department.
   - If writing for publication, check the publisher’s style guide.
   - Pick a style and be consistent.

**Apostrophes with terms**

If you want to discuss the word instead of the thing it refers to, put apostrophes around it.

**EG:** An alternative term for ‘car’ is ‘automobile’.

If the word ends the sentence, put the full stop after the apostrophe. However, be aware that this is an area where there are competing rules. Many style guides and publishers prefer the full stop inside the last apostrophe.

**EG:** An alternative to ‘car’ is ‘automobile.’

Both are equally correct. If you are instructed to put the full stop before the apostrophe, just accept it. The important thing is to be consistent. Do it one way or the other, but not both.

This does not apply to quote marks. Quotations are always contained inside “ ” and the final full stop is always inside the final quote mark. **EG:** “this is my quotation.”

**Commas**

Commas are used in sentences wherever you want the reader to pause. This is normally when you move from one fact or concept to the next, as an alternative for parentheses, between items in a list, after starting a sentence with a connective, and (sometimes) when starting a quote.

There are a great many rules regarding correct use of commas. The following are just those issues people get wrong the most often. If in doubt, consult a reputable guide.
Commas in sentences

The most common mistake with commas is to have too many. Try reading the sentence out loud, pausing for breath every time you see a comma. If it sounds disconnected, you’ve probably got too many commas. A good way to tell is if you can replace the comma with a word.

For example:
“If it sounds disconnected, you’ve probably got too many commas.”

Can be rewritten as:
“If it sounds disconnected then you’ve probably got too many commas.”

But you cannot replace the comma with a word in the following, which shows the comma should not be there:
“One of the best skills a writer can learn, is how to use commas.”

The 7 Coordinating Conjunctions and Commas

A coordinating conjunction is a word which connects two parts of a sentence. There are seven coordinating conjunctions: ‘for’, ‘and’, ‘nor’, ‘but’, ‘or’, ‘yet’, ‘so’.

You must put a comma before a coordinating conjunction. However, be careful – the word must be functioning as a conjunction. All of these words can be used within a sentence without being a conjunction.

EG:
- “I don’t like you, for you are silly” VS “This gift is for you”
- “This machine is amazing, and so I want to buy it” VS “This food is bread and butter”
- “I never saw him jump, nor did I see him fall” VS “He could not jump nor fly”
- “We were out of milk, but I did not buy more” VS “That speech is nothing but hot air”
- “I could hire a car, or I could buy a boat” VS “I could buy a car or a boat”
- “We are drowning, yet I cannot swim” VS “It is not yet time for a change”
- “This food is nice, so I will get more” VS “I am saving money so that I can have a holiday”

The Oxford Comma - ‘and’ in lists

Each item in a list must be separated with a comma except the last one, which takes ‘and’.

EG: This is a list of items, amounts, names, addresses and phone numbers.

Sometimes it can be difficult to tell if the last item includes the word ‘and’.

EG: Please order coffee, cheese, apples, bread and butter.

Here it is impossible to tell if we are to order one item (bread with butter) or two items (butter and bread). In cases like this, put a comma in front of the ‘and’. This is called the ‘oxford comma’.

EG: Please order coffee, cheese, apples, bread, and butter.

Commas with logical connectives

A logical connective is a word which connects two items via logic. The most common logical connectives are ‘therefore’, ‘as a result’, ‘consequently’, ‘thus’, ‘accordingly’, ‘subsequently’, ‘however’, ‘nevertheless’, ‘nonetheless’, ‘conversely’, and ‘on the other hand’.

EG: It is raining therefore it is wet.

‘Therefore’ shows that “it is wet” is a logical conclusion from the fact it is raining.

Logical connectives are often used to start sentences in academic writing. This is because most of academic writing is a chain of reasoning, in which facts lead to conclusions. Whenever a logical connective starts a sentence, it must be followed by a comma.

EG:
- It is true that some people are richer than others. However, society cannot agree what to do about it.
- Most people have two feet. As a result, shoes are sold in pairs.
- The car did not have working brakes. Consequently, it crashed.
The experimental methodology was flawed. Therefore, we cannot trust the conclusions.

He is telling the truth. Nevertheless, I will not believe him.

**TIP:** For better writing style, don’t use the same connective over and over again. There are always alternative words which mean the same. Vary the word you use to make your writing more interesting.

*Commas as parentheses ‘(‘)*

Commas can be used instead of parentheses, any time you like.

EG:

- This sentence (which was written by me) is boring.
- This sentence, which was written by me, is boring.

**TIP:** It is not a strict rule, but academic writing tends to prefer commas.

**Sentence structure**

Sentence structure has a huge impact on how easy it is to understand your writing. However, what constitutes a good sentence structure often depends on the field in which you are writing. Scientific writing tends to use shorter sentences, while the arts tend to use longer sentences. The longest, most complex, sentences are found in philosophy. This is because philosophy is highly focused on the precise meaning of words. Consequently, it often requires many sub-clauses to clarify the terms used.

**Clauses**

Sentences are made of “clauses”. A clause is a group of words containing both a subject and a verb. A verb is a word which tells you something about the subject, such as what it does or what state it is in.

EG: “The man is tall.” ‘The man’ is the subject. ‘Tall’ is the verb.

Clauses can be “independent” or “dependent”. An independent clause can stand alone as a sentence. A dependent clause cannot stand alone as a sentence. Dependent clauses are connected to the sentence by a “conjunction”. A conjunction is a word which explains the relationship between the clause and the rest of the sentence, such as ‘because’, ‘what’, ‘while’, ‘who’, ‘which’, ‘although’ and ‘if’.

Conjunctions are essential for linking the clauses into a coherent sentence. Sentences in which conjunctions which are unclear are called “loose” sentences.

EG:

*Loose sentence:* “John failed university and was sad” – the problem here is ‘and’ – we don’t know if John failed university because he was sad, or was sad because he failed university, or was simply sad and failing at the same time, but for different reasons.

**Using Numbers**

Sometimes you need to write numbers as words, and other times you need to use numerals. The rules depend on the number, the context and the discipline. The following are general guidelines, but you should check with your department if unsure. You should also observe how numbers are treated in your source material, as this is often a good guideline.

**General Rule:**

If the number is below 100, write the word. If it is 100 or greater, use numeral.

**Specific Rules:**

If you are using a precise figure, use numerals (eg: “The object had travelled 12.07 metres by 12:05pm”).

If you are using a rough time, use the words (eg: “I will see you around half past seven.”)

If you are using mathematical notation or formulas, use numerals (eg: “45x + 3y”)

If you are connecting the numbers with words, and the numbers are less than 100, use words (eg: “the age range was 45 – 67”, “their ages ranged from forty-five to sixty-seven”, “their ages ranged from 103 to 204”)
Percentages depend on the type of document. If you are writing scientific or technical documents, use numerals and the symbol, otherwise use words and “percent” (eg: “this is 24% of the sample set” VS “this is twenty-four percent of the sample set”).

Numbering Tables And Charts

This depends on your citation style. Details will be precise, covering use of capital letters, spacing, alignment, numbering sequence and other factors. You will need to refer to the recommended style guide for instructions.

Numbering Headings

There are no general rules about numbering headings which apply everywhere. Sometimes it is a question of your own style, and sometimes your department, publisher or lecturer will have specific preferences. If in doubt, ask. If the document is relatively short, with only a few headings, numbering them is usually unnecessary.

However, if numbering sub-headings, never use letters (eg: “3.1” not “3a” or “3.A”)

Tense

Tense refers to time – past, present, future. The main problem writers have with tense is not being consistent. For example, when discussing what someone wrote in a book, you can use present or past tense. This is because the book still exists, so the content can be discussed in present tense, but the book was written in the past, and so can be discussed using past tense.

EG:
“Austen’s _Pride and Prejudice_ explores customs regarding polite conversation”

“Austen’s _Pride and Prejudice_ explored customs regarding polite conversation.”

Whichever you choose, it is absolutely critical you are consistent.

EG:

WRONG: “Austen’s _Pride and Prejudice_ explored customs regarding polite conversation. This demonstrates the interest she feels in the details of social discourse.” (used past then present)

WRONG: “Austen’s _Pride and Prejudice_ explores customs regarding polite conversation. This demonstrated the interest she feels in the details of social discourse.” (used present then past)

RIGHT: “Austen’s _Pride and Prejudice_ explored customs regarding polite conversation. This demonstrated the interest she felt in the details of social discourse.” (all past)

RIGHT: “Austen’s _Pride and Prejudice_ explores customs regarding polite conversation. This demonstrates the interest she feels in the details of social discourse.” (all present)

Shifting Tense

Sometimes you need to move from one tense to another. This often happens when you need to relate something in the past to the present or future. Which tense you continue in depends on the focus of your discussion.

EG:

“The crew constructed the set yesterday because it will be needed tomorrow. Their construction work was excellent.” – focus is on the past

“The crew constructed the set yesterday because it will be needed tomorrow. Their construction will be appreciated when the audience arrives.” – focus is on the future

“He was listening, but is now talking. His speech indicates he did not listen properly” – focus is on both past and future – the present is telling us something about the past

Precise Language

Academic writing demands you understand exactly what your words mean. Normal conversation allows for exaggeration and imprecise language. However, academic writing demands precision. Avoid the following terms:
**Everyone:** If you say “everyone believes this” you are stating you have surveyed every single person on the planet and that not a single person disagreed. You cannot make any statement about what people believe unless you have survey evidence to prove it.

**No one:** Using “no one” implies you have checked with every person on earth.

**All:** If you say “all the sources state” you are saying you have read everything ever published on this topic, in all of human history, in every language. It would be more appropriate to say that everything you have read agrees, but this merely begs the question of how much reading you’ve done. It is better to provide numbers, such as “sixty-eight English-language peer-reviewed papers published since 2003 were surveyed. All supported the same position.”

Avoid claiming you are the first to discover something or the first to examine a topic. It is highly unlikely you are first, and you will really irritate someone who has already worked on that topic but who you didn’t discover in your research.

**Acronyms**

Acronyms are the reduction of a name to its initials. For example ‘UN’ for ‘United Nations’ and ‘IRC’ for ‘Irish Research Council.’ You must use the full name and put the acronym in brackets the first time you use it so that the reader understands what it means.

**EG:**

“The Irish Council for Better Writing (ICBW) supports correct spelling. The ICBW recently surveyed newspaper articles….”

Do not create acronyms for the sake of it. Use them if they already exist. However, creating new acronyms only confuses the reader. Avoid using too many. This also confuses the reader.

**EG – too many acronyms:**

“The United Nations (UN) conducted its Annual Survey on Corporate Attitudes (ASCA) under the guidance of the Rules for Corporate Governance (RFCG) from the US Chamber of Commerce (USCC), in accord with the Federal Trade Commission (FDA) Guidelines on Management (GoM). The USCC stated that the UN use of RFCG invalidated the ASCA. However, analysis of the ASCA indicates the USCC had misinterpreted the RFCG’s role in ASCA by ignoring the FDA GoM.”

**Headings & Tables of Contents**

Headings are unnecessary in short essays of less than 3,000 words. They are optional between 3,000 and 6,000 words. They are necessary for any document over 6,000 words. Headings should follow the logical structure of your argument, indicating each time you significantly change the subject. The length of each headed section varies according to the writer, the discipline and the publication, but it would be rare to see sections of less than 1,000 words.

Some departments have stylistic preferences for headings, as do some lecturers, so check to see if they have preferences whenever you are writing anything over 3,000 words.

Headings can be numbered, or not. Numbering is more common when documents are larger or highly formal (such as a PhD thesis or Master’s dissertation).

Citation styles usually contain formatting instructions for headings. For example, Harvard recognises up to four levels of heading – “major”, “a-heads”, “b-heads” and “c-heads.” Major headings are for chapter titles; a-heads are reserved for major subdivisions of a chapter; b-heads (level 3 headings) are for subsections within b-headed sections, and c-heads are to be used as little as possible. Harvard defines font, line spacing and alignment for each.

Microsoft word has a strict heading system which enables you to specify that something is a heading and what level it is. It is worth mastering this. It enables you to reformat all headings at a single command. If you use Word’s paragraphing heading styles Word can automatically create a table of contents from your headings.

Your work cannot contain a table of contents unless it has headings, but if it does, it is always worth putting a table of contents on its own page at the start of the document. If you let Word do this automatically, it can keep the page numbers updated if you edit the document later. While Word can go down six levels in headings, a Table of Contents should only go down to level one or two. If your table of contents cannot fit onto a single page, it probably goes too deep.