→ **SAGE Study Skills**

The Good Writing Guide for Education Students

4th Edition

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⑤SAGE

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Proofreading

Introduction

You can greatly improve your writing through learning how to proofread. Proofreading requires an understanding of how language works, so this chapter discusses the main challenges and common pitfalls of grammar, punctuation and spelling in academic writing. In order to help you think about improving your own writing, we discuss the kinds of errors that students often make and consider how spell-checks and grammar-checks can be used as tools to support your writing, as well as strategies for effective proofreading.

Key Topics

- How to avoid common grammar traps
- How to write concisely
- How to structure sentences
- How to use punctuation marks
- How to remember common spelling errors
- How to improve your spelling
- How to use technology to support your writing
- How to present your work
- How to proofread effectively

Proofreading is a demanding skill for all writers but it is one that gets better with thought and practice. If you are tackling forms of writing new to you then proofreading is even harder than it is for forms that you are more familiar

with. First and foremost it requires you to have the attitude that mistakes really do matter. If your attitude is that you don't really care, you will need to change it, if you want to improve. You will also need to start taking an active interest in the way that language works and its conventions. The fact that you have bought this book is already a really good step along the road to becoming a better writer! Overall you need to develop your ear for language and learn to read like a writer. We are going to discuss three important aspects of language: grammar, punctuation and spelling. Each section will explain some common traps that students can fall into, and knowing about them will hopefully help you to avoid them in your own writing.

Grammar

To start you thinking about grammar, here are a couple of puzzles to solve. Can you think of:

- a grammatical sentence with the word "and" repeated five times in succession?
- a grammatical sentence with the word "had" repeated nine times in succession?

You will find the answers at the end of the chapter.

Grammar is one of the most important parts of writing. It is the way that words and sentences are put together in order to express meaning. It is also one of those subjects, like apostrophes, neat handwriting, the Queen's English, and so on, that can make some people get quite worked up!

At the heart of many arguments about grammar are different views about how language works. Some people believe that there is a fixed set of grammatical rules which you simply have to learn in order to speak and write correctly. People with this view can be called **prescriptive grammarians**. Most modern linguists take a different view. They see language as something to be described and analysed in order to understand the way that it is used. **Descriptive grammarians** are interested in the way that all language use reflects a particular context, such as the social background of the speaker and the setting in which the message is communicated. This kind of information needs to be taken into account when analysing language and suggesting the rules that are at work. The idea that particular features of language are correct or incorrect is simply a product of someone's judgement, not an absolute rule. However, there can be no doubt that there are a wide range of language conventions that need to be followed if writing is to be seen to be "correct". And just in case you think we are suggesting that anything goes, the following statement is definitely incorrect: rules are grammar no there for.

Key Fact

Claims about incorrect language use typically focus on a tiny proportion of the language. In other words, more than 99 per cent of our speech does not cause anyone to claim that it is incorrect but there are a few phrases which repeatedly cause disagreement.

We also need to make a clear distinction between talking and writing. Talk is much less subject to standard conventions than writing and tends to be more informal, although occasions such as formal speeches are a different case. Writing is subject to more agreement about what is correct than talking, although the internet and other electronic texts continue to challenge this idea. Conventional or "correct" writing is standardised by various authoritative sources such as major dictionaries, style guides (such as the APA 6th style guide we have mentioned in this book), books like this one, and computer packages/functions such as the grammar-check. This greater standardisation of writing has occurred because there is the need for it to communicate without ambiguity to a wider range of people at ever greater distances.

Top Tip

Think about grammar as a set of conventions to be learned rather than as fixed rules.

Improving your grammar requires you to learn to proofread each word, phrase, sentence and paragraph in your writing separately. You also have to read the words and phrases in the wider context of the sentence and paragraph and think carefully about whether they fit properly. In order to write conventional grammar in your assignments, you need to develop an "ear" for academic language, learning when sentences "sound" right. Reading widely is one good way to become familiar with the typical style of academic language. Improving your grammar can also be helped by recognising some of the common problems that students have and then applying this knowledge when looking carefully at your own writing.

Here are some common grammar traps which many students fall into:

- Ambiguous meaning. If you are struggling to understand the subject that you are writing about this can result in poor grammar. If this is the case, go back to the key texts for your assignment, read them again, list the key points and make sure you understand before you redraft.

- Being too informal. We all use the way that we speak to help us write. After all, writing is a way of representing spoken language. But writing has developed sophisticated conventions of its own which mean that it is different from speech, and generally more formal.
- Writing which is too wordy. Academic writing should aim to be clear and concise. Here's an example of a sentence which is too wordy: "It has been the case that a brief shortened version of the policy was introduced due to the fact that the original was considered as being overly long in length". There are several repetitive, redundant phrases here. We call this kind of repetition "tautology", which means using different words/phrases to say the same thing twice. The same point could be made much more clearly and effectively as: "A shortened version of the policy was introduced because the original was considered too long".
- Using mixed tenses. As a general rule, the tense should be the same throughout a piece of writing. Here's an example of mixing tenses resulting from a possible lack of understanding: "*In 2002* 80 per cent of 11-year-olds *are* expected". The student was writing in 2003 so the tense should have been "were expected". It is important to remember that the year of publication is not just a convention of the author/date citation: it means the year that the text was published (and written some time before the publication date).
- Using contractions. A contraction is the use of an apostrophe to show where two words have been joined together (for example, "Will not" becomes contracted as "Won't"; "It is" becomes contracted as "It's"). Contractions are a common feature of speech and informal writing (and used by us in this book), but are not usually found in academic writing. However, you will still use apostrophes for other reasons (see punctuation section below).
- First or third person? Many people quite rightly point out that you should not use "I" (first person) in an academic piece of writing (for example, "I have found research showing that formal grammar teaching does not help writing"). Academic writing is often more effective when written in the third person ("*Researchers* have shown that formal grammar teaching does not help writing"). There are exceptions to this though. For example, you might be explaining what you personally did as part of teaching practice. It is perfectly OK to use "I" occasionally but you do need to check how often and guard against overuse.
- Sentence length. If your sentences are too long, you are more likely to be unclear. On the other hand, too many short sentences can make the writing disjointed. Start the first draft of your writing with simple short sentences that are as clear as possible. Then work on making them flow. Sometimes you may join two short sentences together to improve the flow. Quite often, the choice of the first word in a sentence can make the difference between disjointed sentences and smoothly flowing ones.
- A lack of cohesion. The words, sentences and paragraphs need to link together to convey meaning. See Chapter 5 for guidance regarding structuring sections and paragraphs, and check that every sentence within a paragraph is complete, and makes sense in terms of what comes before and after it.
- Not understanding punctuation (see the next section of this chapter).
- Poor spacing, layout and capitalisation. These are often simply "typos" that may be identified with the help of a computer's grammar-check and careful proofreading

Computer grammar-check tools and autotranslate

Computer grammar-checks built into word processing packages can raise your awareness of some of the common problems outlined above, and for that reason you should try using them. But like all computer programs, a grammar-check function has to work by using rigid rules. In fact, the grammar-check is a perfect example of how prescriptive grammar is an inadequate way to think about language. The biggest problem for the computer is that it cannot understand your intended meaning and the particular context of the points that you are making. This can result in some dubious suggestions. You should think of the grammar-check as a tool to raise your awareness of some grammar issues, but make sure that you have the confidence to overrule it when it fails to understand your meaning properly.

A similar approach is needed towards automatic translation software. Free online tools like Google Translate may be helpful for translating occasional words, but they work less well for translating large sections of text. Meaning inevitably changes from language to language, and such technology is unable to go beyond a surface level of grammatical accuracy. Without depth of understanding of the content and context of the language, mechanical translation tools like these may introduce all kinds of new errors. If writing in English is challenging, a better strategy is to invest time in courses specialising in academic writing for international students.

Technology can sometimes be helpful, but the best approach is to develop a sound understanding of grammar yourself and use the tools cautiously as a "back up". The following example offers a chance to check your own awareness of grammatical issues.

Student example: test your grammar

A student was writing an essay about literacy education. Here's a quote from the essay. Cover the second paragraph to see if you can work out the problems before you see the answers.

> Various research evidence throughout the nineteen nineties looked at the teaching and learning of English and it was conclusive that pupils knowledge, skills and understanding in the area of English could be substantially increased. This was also evident in the results of the National Tests for English and therefore, the teaching of English education within schools needed improvement.

> [1]Various research evidence throughout the nineteen nineties[2] looked at the teaching and learning of English and it was conclusive that[3] pupils[4] knowledge, skills and understanding in the area of English could be substantially increased. This was also evident in the results of the National Tests[5] for English and therefore,[6] the teaching of English education within schools[7] needed improvement.

So many things to think about in only two sentences! The first thing to say about the student's writing extract above is that the two points are good ones:

- In the 1990s it was felt that standards of pupils' reading and writing could be improved.
- The statutory tests (or SATs in everyday language) indicated that standards could be better.

However, the good points are obscured by some of the grammatical problems. Let's have a look at each of the problems in turn:

1. Too wordy – the word "various" is not needed. "Research evidence throughout the 1990s" would have been fine. To keep the word "various" and be grammatically appropriate, the sentence would have to read "Various pieces of research evidence" but then this sounds like there wasn't much research.
2. Unconventional – this is not incorrect but in a text like this it is conventional to put 1990s. Note that there should not be an apostrophe after the zero.
3. Too wordy – "and concluded that" or "and it was concluded that" would be better.
4. Missing apostrophe – should be "pupils' knowledge" because the student meant more than one pupil's knowledge.
5. Capital letters not needed – in general, capital letters are often overused in assignments. The name "national curriculum" is an interesting case. When it was first used in 1988 it was normal to use capitals ("National Curriculum") but since then the convention has changed to no capitals unless it is part of the title in the reference list.
6. Slightly ambiguous – this is not incorrect but the point would be stronger if "and therefore" was replaced by the phrase "adding further evidence that". This has the effect of properly linking the second point about test results with the first point about research in the 1990s.
7. Too wordy – if "education within schools" is deleted then the point is clearer: the teaching of English needed improvement.

Key Fact

Do not be downhearted if you find that you are making some grammatical mistakes. All writers make mistakes. Becoming aware of the common pitfalls and identifying the grammatical issues you find most challenging is a good first step towards improving your writing.

Punctuation

Punctuation marks are small in size yet very important in helping you to make your meaning clear. This section discusses the purpose of some of the main punctuation marks. In order to help you think about your own use of punctuation, you will also read about the kinds of errors that students often make with punctuation marks.

The most basic punctuation mark is the full stop. We often say that a full stop is used to mark the end of a sentence but this begs the question "What is a sentence?". People often say that a sentence is something that begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop. This is a bit of a circular description if we are trying to explain a full stop: a full stop is used at the end of a sentence and a sentence has a full stop at the end! It is also linguistically inaccurate. Sentences sometimes end with question marks or exclamation marks. Many printed sentences lack punctuation, such as newspaper headlines. Spoken sentences do not have a capital letter and a full stop either. Having said that, it is very rare that we speak in the exact equivalent of written sentences; speech has different organisational and structural features.

Defining a sentence is not easy but the work of David Crystal (2004) is very helpful for this discussion. A sentence is:

- a construction which can be used on its own, without people feeling that it is incomplete
- the largest construction to which the rules of grammar apply ("rules" in a descriptive sense)
- constructed according to a system of rules which are naturally acquired by nearly all the mother-tongue speakers of the language. A sentence formed in this way is said to be grammatical (Crystal, 2004, p. 37).

Minor sentences such as "Hello." "Eh?" "Like father, like son." "Wish you were here." "Taxi!" are irregular. Major sentences are what we usually mean when we refer to sentences. There are two types of major sentence: a simple sentence and a multiple sentence.

A simple sentence contains one clause. A clause must contain a verb and is built from "clause elements" (which consist of one or more words).

Clause element	Subject	Verb	Object
Clause (also a simple sentence in this example)	You	threw	a stone

Key Fact

Clauses can have the following elements:

- subject (S)
- verb (V)
- object (O)
- complement (C) (further information about another clause element)
- adverbial (A) (further information about the situation).

There are seven basic clause types: S+V; S+V+O; S+V+C; S+V+A; S+V+O+O; S+V+O+C; S+V+O+A.

A multiple sentence contains more than one clause. There are two main types:

1. A compound sentence: the clauses, which could in principle stand as sentences on their own, are linked by coordinators such as "and", "or", "but". For example, "I like his hat [main clause] but I don't like his coat [main clause]".
2. A complex sentence: the clauses are linked by subordination with words like "because", "when", "although". One clause (the subordinate clause) is subordinated to another (the main clause). The subordinate clause cannot stand as a sentence on its own because it relies grammatically on another clause. The information it contains is in the background compared to the main clause. For example, "I answered the door [main clause] when Jane rang the bell [subordinate clause]" (Crystal, 2004, p. 201).

All of that was a slightly lengthy explanation of why a sentence is not just something that begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop! The simplest and most accurate description of a sentence is that it is something which makes complete sense on its own and *usually* begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop.

Top Tip

You may feel that the terminology is a bit confusing. You do not need to remember the terminology to write well, if you develop a good ear for language. However, it is useful professionally, when you are reading about linguistic issues or talking about them, because it can help you describe language more succinctly.

The first step in using punctuation better is to know what the main punctuation marks are used for. Most of the explanations for these are more straightforward than the one for the full stop.

Understanding punctuation marks

Comma ,

A comma separates clauses and clause elements in a sentence in order to clarify meaning and to avoid ambiguity. If you read one of your sentences and it does not quite make sense, look at the use of commas and either delete or add a comma. Commas have many other uses but are used particularly to separate items in a list or items in sentences which have list-like structures. The comma indicates a slight pause in the flow of the sentence when reading aloud.

Semicolon ;

A semicolon separates main clauses that are not joined by a **coordinator**, which the semicolon replaces. The two parts of the sentence feel equally important. A semicolon represents a break in the flow of the sentence which is stronger than a comma but weaker than a full stop. For example, "The students in the first study were hard working; those in the second were lazy".

> ### Key Fact
>
> A coordinator is a word which links parts of a sentence. The most common coordinators are "and", "or" and "but". Some people call these conjunctions.

Colon :

A colon separates a first clause, which could stand as a sentence, from a final phrase or clause that extends or illustrates the first clause. It is most commonly used to introduce things, like lists or an example. See paragraph two of this punctuation section (page 133) for an example of the use of a colon mid-sentence.

> ### Top Tip
>
> If in doubt about using a colon or semicolon mid-sentence, try rewording the sentence or using a comma instead.

Apostrophe '

This is the punctuation mark that probably catches more students out than any other. There are four main uses:

- contraction: didn't = did not
- possession singular: the cat's tail, the child's book
- possession plural: the cats' tails, the children's books (as "children" is an irregular plural word, the apostrophe comes before the "s")
- possession with name ending in "s": Donald Graves's book (although Donald Graves' book is not incorrect).

Common errors include:

1. "This first happened in the 60's" – logically, "60s" is plural, not a contraction. However, in the past "60's" was used as a way to signal plural but the convention has changed to "60s" in recent times.
2. "Was that it's name?" – confusion between "its" (possessive) and "it's" (contraction of "it is"). This possessive form is irregular and does not have an apostrophe as in "Was that its name?"

Parenthesis (including brackets)

This can be indicated with dashes (–) or commas but is most effective with brackets (such as the ones surrounding this comment).

Parenthesis means structurally independent words or phrases which elaborate the meaning of sentences and which are often separated by brackets ( ). Square brackets [ ] are used in academic writing to indicate that the words have been added by you and should not be confused with the quoted source (see pages 91–92 of Chapter 7 on Referencing).

Hyphen -

A hyphen links words or phrases to clarify meaning and indicates that words are part of a single expression. For example:

- We must re-form the group.
- The children were involved in role-play.

Dash –

The length of the line is given different names. One name is the *en-dash* (–), which is used to indicate a page range, e.g. pp. 23–35, to mark parenthesis or to show a relationship, e.g. work–life balance. The *em-dash* (—) is longer and can also be used to mark parenthesis. It can further be used to indicate part of a sentence added as an afterthought but a comma is often better for this. In reality, we usually use the hyphen key on the keyboard for most of these uses because it is easier than using the insert menu's *insert symbol*, *special characters* function. A word processor's *Autocorrect* feature normally inserts the appropriate dash but you may need to check this.

Slash /

A slash is often used to indicate words or phrases that are used interchangeably. For example, "The statutory tests/SATs were carried out on the same day".

Ellipsis …

Shown by three dots, an ellipsis indicates where something has been omitted. It is often used to show that part of the text from a quote has been omitted (see page 92 of the Referencing chapter). It is also used in fiction writing to indicate an unfinished thought or to imply continuation of thinking.

Quotation marks " " or ' '

Systems for using single or double quotation marks vary, but whichever system you use it's important to be consistent. The advice we offer here follows the American Psychological Association guide that we recommend throughout this book.

Double quotation marks are used to enclose a quote from a published source of less than 40 words (use single marks within the double quotation marks for material that was enclosed in double marks in the original source, i.e. to indicate a quote within a quote).

Long quotations of more than 40 words are spaced and indented, and are not enclosed within quotation marks (use double quote marks to enclose material that was in quotation marks within the original). If punctuation is part of the quoted material then place it within the quotation marks.

Single quotation marks are often used to enclose direct speech in works of fiction. Single quotation marks enclose the title of a journal article or the chapter of a book if mentioned in the main text. Italics are used to indicate the title of a book, journal, magazine or film. They are also used for the introduction of a new, technical or key term or to label the first time it is used but not subsequently. For further explanation of how and when to quote, see Chapter 7.

Top Tip

If your punctuation seems to be wrong, it may be because your understanding of the topic you are writing about is not strong enough. Go back to your planning and think again about the points that you are making. If necessary, do some more reading and thinking, and then redraft your writing.

Student examples: problems with punctuation

To improve your punctuation, it can be helpful to look at some of the ways that students typically misuse punctuation marks.

Full stop

> The girl was relying mostly on the story and her knowledge of language to help her decode words. Which is good because it means that she is using sensible strategies and understands what she is reading but the phonic errors suggest this is an area which could be improved.

The problem is with the full stop in the section "help her decode words. Which is …". Normally you would expect the sentence to continue without any punctuation at this point. The student realised that if this was the case the sentence would be very long and so tried to break it up with punctuation. This was a good idea but it required changes to the grammar to match the change to the punctuation. A better alternative would be:

> The girl was using her knowledge of the story and her knowledge of language to help the decoding of words. These were effective strategies which particularly helped her understanding of the meaning of the story, but phonic miscues suggested that her phonological understanding was an area for improvement.

The use of tense always requires careful handling; notice how we changed the example to past tense. The interesting thing here is the way that a number of changes are made to the meaning in order to correct what appears to be a routine problem with a full stop. Knowledge of the subject of the writing is an important part of this. Quite often, a lack of full understanding of the concepts and issues that the student is grappling with shows itself in weak grammar and punctuation. These changes show that, as with all things in the writing process, it is not simply a case of obeying a rule.

Comma

> Over the last forty years psychologists discovered children know a lot implicitly about how language works, and they use this knowledge to form expectations about meaning from speech, along with written language as long as it is in a meaningful context.

The first comma is unnecessary because the meaning is clear without it. The second comma is also unnecessary for the same reason and because it provides an unnecessary break in the flow of the sentence. However, if you take the commas out the sentence does not communicate its meaning clearly, mainly because it is too long. The following is better:

(Continued)

(Continued)

> Over the last forty years psychologists have discovered much more about children's implicit knowledge. Children's language knowledge results in them having an expectation that speech and writing communicate meaning. In order to derive meaning from written language young children in particular benefit from writing being part of a meaningful context.

Once again, the problem is not simply one of re-punctuating. In particular, the point made in the final sentence is not sufficiently developed. It would probably need a new paragraph with some examples and further explanation offered.

Top Tip

Use tutor feedback and computer spell-checks and grammar-checks to identify your own most common errors, and look out for them in particular as you proofread your drafts.

Spelling

The history of the development of English has resulted in its spelling being especially difficult. It is tricky mainly because as a language it has more phonological irregularity than other languages such as Spanish or Finnish. It is the irregularity of English spelling that can make it demanding to learn.

Accurate spelling is important in academic writing because you need your intended meaning to be completely clear. Spelling errors can accidentally change what you are trying to say and can distract your reader from the content. A reader also forms judgements about a piece of writing based on their perceptions of its accuracy, so spending time getting spelling, grammar and punctuation correct is worthwhile.

Many spelling problems in education students' writing are more to do with grammar than a lack of understanding about how to spell particular words. Let's have a look at some examples.

Incorrect: "will give the teacher ideas about were a child is in their learning"

Correct: "will give the teacher ideas about where a child is in their learning"

Sometimes this mistake is a typo and in some parts of the country it relates to the way that "were" is pronounced. Apart from the spelling/grammar problem, the language of the extract is not precise enough. A better wording might have been, "will give the teacher ideas to assess the child's learning"; this avoids the original problem altogether.

Incorrect: "investigating what areas where like in the past"

Correct: "investigating what areas were like in the past"

This is the same error reversed.

Just in case you think that this is a rather basic mistake, here is a quote from the first page of the May 2005 edition of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) journal *Research Intelligence*:

> One of the challenges of the BERA conference is that different groups want very different things from it. Traditionally it has been seen primarily as a conference for the educational research community itself; a place were researchers, whether just starting out or well established, can talk to colleagues in a supportive and open atmosphere.

Incorrect: "which meant she rusted the activities"

Correct: "which meant she rushed the activities"

Definite typing error, or "typo" here. The "T" is close to the "H" on the keyboard. Unfortunately, "rusted" is spelled correctly, so would not be picked up by a spell-check, but obviously does not make sense in the context.

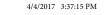**Incorrect**: "comparing the seaside now to what it use to be like in the past"

Correct: "comparing the seaside now to what it used to be like in the past"

Sometimes in the course of changing the tense of a piece of writing you can miss some of the other words that need changing.

Incorrect: "which is an on going type of assessment"

Correct: "which is an ongoing type of assessment"

This is really a hyphen problem but, once again, the spell-check does not pick this up, although the grammar-check might do.

Common spelling errors

We all have a number of words that we persistently misspell or misuse. Often these are words that are pronounced the same but spelled differently (known as homophones). Here are some words that are particularly easy to confuse, as well as some examples to help remember them.

Effect and affect

"Effect" is mainly used as a noun, whereas "affect" is mostly used as a verb. However, when you look them up in the dictionary you see that they can be used in a wide range of ways and confusingly both can be either a noun or a verb. To remind yourself you could think about the noun "special effects", whereas "to affect" is a verb, for example "the activity affected the pupil's motivation".

Practice and practise

These two are important for education students who have to think about teaching practice and practising their teaching skills. As you saw in the last sentence, "practice" is mainly used as a noun whereas "practise" is used mostly as a verb.

Principle and principal

We need to go back to first principles on this one! "Principal" can be remembered by the idea that an American head teacher is called a principal, whereas "principle" is something that forms the basis for thought and/or action. To help you remember the difference, Dominic once applied for a job as a principal lecturer, a job which he got in spite of the fact that the application included the spelling error "Principle Lecturer". Not bad for the author of a book like this!

Inquiry and enquiry

A public inquiry is something that frequently is reported in the media. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that "enquire" is an alternative form of "inquire".

Other dictionaries say that "inquire" is standard English but "enquire" is still very frequently used, especially in the sense "to ask a question".

Let's and lets

Use "let's", a contraction, when you mean "let us". Use "lets", a verb, when you mean "allows" or "rents".

Who's and whose

Use "who's", a contraction, when you mean "who is". Use "whose", a pronoun, to indicate possession – for example, "Whose books are these?"

Computer spell-check tools

As with grammar-check tools, spell-checks work on rigid rules, searching your writing and highlighting spellings that are different to its dictionary. Many computer programs now also have an "autocorrect" feature which will change a spelling automatically to its suggested version as you type. This can be a helpful tool to reduce the number of spelling mistakes, but it can also introduce new errors, for example, by automatically changing English spellings to American versions.

Top Tip

Your word-processor software may be set to default to American English rather than UK English. You can change a document's language in the "Tools/Language" menu item. You can change the default language in all new documents by editing and saving the "Normal" template document.

Spell-checks are also unable to pick up words which are spelled correctly but do not make sense in the context of the writing (as in the example of "rusted" for "rushed" or the homophones above). Like grammar-checks, spell-checks should be thought of as helpful *tools* for supporting your writing, but they should not be relied upon to spot every error. Your aim should be to understand the basic principles and conventions of academic writing first, and then to invest time in identifying your common spelling errors, using technology as a back-up.

How to improve your spelling

Each time we use the computer spell-check (or proofread our writing), we are given a reminder about the words we spell wrongly. In order to learn how to remember these words we need to think more actively. First of all, you need to identify which letter(s) in the word you find difficult to remember. Next, try and think of a logical way of breaking the word into smaller parts. It can be helpful to think about stems, **prefixes** and **suffixes**. Finally, try and use analogies with other similar words to help you remember the word next time. The key aspect of the similar words is that they share visual characteristics more than aural characteristics. In other words, they look similar rather than sound similar.

Key Fact

A prefix consists of a letter or letters placed at the front of a word or stem to form a new word: for example, in "before"/"be-fore", "be" is the prefix and "fore" is the stem. A suffix consists of a letter or letters placed at the end of a word or stem to form a new word: for example, in "shorten"/"short-en", "short" is the stem and "en" is the suffix.

You also need to develop a range of other strategies to help you remember problem words. Here are some suggestions:

- Think about spelling "rules". Although there are always exceptions to spelling rules, the process of thinking about them and investigating the extent to which they work can help to improve spelling. One of the best-known rules is: i before e except after c when the sound is /ee/: for example, "field" or "receive".
- Develop your visual memory for words. Margaret Peters argued that spelling is largely a visual memory skill so she encouraged teachers to use the strategy of "look, cover, write, check". This involves looking at the correct spelling of a problem word, covering it, attempting to write it and then checking to see if you wrote it correctly (Peters, 1985).
- Consider mnemonics and other devices. Think of "necessary" as two ships on the sea, or two sleeves and one collar (two s's and one c).
- Sound out words as they look. An example of this is: /bus/ /ee/ /ness/ for business.
- Use a dictionary. A good dictionary, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* online, *Chambers* or *Longmans*, is a fascinating resource. Look up your problem words and read about their different meanings, and the different grammatical functions that they have. Greater knowledge about words and seeing them in the context of the dictionary can help jog your memory when you next come to write them.
- Play word games. Games and puzzles like Scrabble, crosswords, word searches, and so on all require standard spelling and can build up a knowledge of word structures.

Presentation

One of the traps that many students fall into is to think that the more special effects there are in a text the more exciting it is. Shakespeare's comment that "all that glisters is not gold" is relevant here. The best kind of academic presentation is one that least obscures the points that you are putting forward. To put this another way, the presentation should simply enhance what you are saying by not being obtrusive. You should not feel that a piece of writing that follows all the conventions accurately is a boring one. On the contrary, if your message is well researched and the language you use is effective this can be very exciting for the reader, particularly if they learn something themselves. This is particularly the case for electronic presentations such as PowerPoint or Prezi. Make sure that the features of the technology enhance rather than obscure the message you want to get across.

> ### Key Fact
>
> Every course will have its own requirements for precisely how your work should be presented (e.g. font size, double spacing or single spacing). Find out the expected conventions and follow them carefully. Check your presentation in the final stages of your proofreading.

There is a tradition in universities of requiring written work to be "double spaced". This means it has a full blank line the same height as a line of print between the rows of words. Originally this was done because all assessments were handwritten, and the supervisor needed to add their comments by hand between the lines of the student's work. With the advent of word-processing software, which allows for track changes and comments, the requirement to double-space is rather a waste of paper when printed. However, if double spacing is a requirement on your course then the final submission will have to be double spaced. When you work on early drafts of writing we would recommend you use single spacing because it is easier to judge the appropriateness of the length of paragraphs and sections. In particular you will spot those paragraphs that are very short and therefore need joining to another paragraph or expanding.

How to proofread

Knowing about the way language works, and common mistakes, is a good way to improve your writing. Your writing can also be improved by careful,

critical reading of your work. Learn to see writing as a series of drafts. When you are doing the first drafts, you need to concentrate on getting the words down. Don't worry too much about errors at this point, just keep writing. There is no point trying to correct errors at the level of the word or sentence if the overall structure of the text has not been settled (go back to Chapter 4 and read the section on retrospective planning as a way of checking whether the overall structure is ready). Once you are happy with the overall structure, it is time to get down to the nitty-gritty. Or is it? One of the difficulties for any writer is detaching themselves from the message of their writing. If you try and move straight from composing to proofreading, you may find it difficult because you keep attending to the message rather than the surface features of the language. If time allows, you should leave the writing for a while; the longer the better so that you can return to it with fresh eyes. Imagine yourself wearing at least two different hats. The first hat is your "author" hat. When you have got this hat on, you should work on the message until the writing says what you want it to say. Your second hat is the "proofreader" hat. When you have got this hat on, you must look carefully at every word and sentence to correct the grammar, spelling, punctuation and presentation.

As the deadline approaches, it is then time to really get down to the proofreading. Try starting with the sentences in the first paragraph. Read each sentence one at a time and ask yourself after each one, is that correct? Then ask yourself, does it fit with the sentence before? Having got to the end of a paragraph ask yourself, do all the sentences in that paragraph belong there and do they relate to each other properly? Once you are happy with the sentences and paragraphs, run the spell-check and actively think about ways to remember each misspelling. Having done the spell-check, read through again looking for words that are spelled correctly but are inappropriate grammatically. If you are not very good at proofreading then in the early stages you need to say to yourself, is that word correct? If the answer is yes, move on to the next word; if no, replace the word and start proofreading again at the beginning of the sentence. The same process has to be carried out to check punctuation as well. The good news is that if you work very slowly and methodically at first, then as you become better at proofreading you will get much quicker.

> **Top Tip**
>
> Try reading your work aloud to highlight errors you might otherwise miss.

A useful stage, if possible, is to ask someone who is better at proofreading than you, to have a look at your work and for you to learn from their ideas by checking them against the information in books like this. Tutors and study skills tutors will not normally proofread assignments, although they might read extracts and offer general advice. Sometimes you will see proofreading services advertised for a fee. Be cautious about using these as some institutions class this as plagiarism. For example, UCL states that use of "outside word-processing agencies which offer correction/improvement of English is strictly forbidden, and students who make use of the services of such agencies render themselves liable for an academic penalty" (UCL, 2016). Proofreading takes time to develop, but it's an important skill to learn for yourself. Proofreading your own work also means you are more likely to learn about yourself as a writer.

Top Tip

Leave more time than you think you will need for proofreading and proofread more than once.

Don't worry if you are slow at first – you will get quicker. If you really do not have time to proofread every word of an assignment carefully then identify the most major issue that affects the clarity of your writing (e.g. sentence length) and focus on addressing this rather than more minor errors (e.g. spelling). If you are very short of time, make sure you look at the first page in particular. When examiners look at an assignment they often scrutinise the first page particularly carefully. If they find a lot of errors then they are more likely to look at the proofreading of the other pages.

Dos and Don'ts

Do

- take time to think about the way language works, appreciating the links between grammar, punctuation, spelling and meaning
- learn to recognise your common mistakes by comparing them with some of the ones in this chapter
- use technology like spell-checks and grammar-checks as tools to support your writing.

(Continued)

(Continued)

Don't

- rely completely on technology such as spell-checks, grammar-checks and auto-translate, as they won't pick up every error and can introduce new mistakes
- leave the proofreading too close to the deadline
- forget that every word counts.

Answers to puzzles

1. A fish and chip shop owner is replacing his shop sign but the sign writer writes "fishandchips". The owner says, "You should leave a gap between 'fish' and 'and' and 'and' and 'chips'".
2. During a discussion with two students about an assignment that they had just done, the tutor raised the issue of whether a key point should have been: (a) "Andrew had a lot of problems" or (b) "Andrew had had a lot of problems". Jill had used "had" and Jack had changed his from "had had" to "had". The tutor observed that, "Jack, where Jill had had 'had', had had 'had had'; 'had had' was correct'".

Not the most elegant grammar I admit! If you are struggling to understand the meaning of the sentence, the logic is as follows:

- Jack had originally used the phrase "had had".
- At the same point in the assignment, Jill had used the phrase "had".
- "Had had" was the correct phrase.

Activity

There are twelve issues to do with grammar, punctuation and spelling in the extract below to test your proofreading. Try and work out the mistakes before you look at the answers. Once you have understood the points repeat the exercise, without looking at the answers in order to help your memory of things to look for.

Smith (Smith, 1994) gave a few simple rules to the volunteers that that could have implecations for teachers on going practise, "If the mistake doesn't make sense, then prompt with a clue about the meaning of the story. If the mistake makes sense, prompt with a clue about the way the word looks. If the reader does not say anything ask them to read to the end of the sentence or go back to the beginning of the sentence again."

Smith[1] ([2]Smith,[3] 1994) gave a few simple rules to the volunteers that that[4] could have implecations[5] for teachers[6] on going[7] practise[8,9] "[10]If the mistake doesn't make sense,[11] then prompt with a clue about the meaning of the story. If the mistake makes sense, prompt with a clue about the way the word looks. If the reader does not say anything ask them to read to the end of the sentence or go back to the beginning of the sentence again."[12]

Here are the explanations for the mistakes:

1. Don't repeat the name for a citation.
2. When citing in this way the brackets should surround the year of the publication not the name of the author.
3. The comma is not necessary if the bracket is moved and the repeat of the name deleted.
4. Accidental repetition of "that".
5. A misspelling of "implications": the kind of spelling error a spell-check is likely to identify.
6. This is a possessive plural (referring to the practice of many teachers) so should have an apostrophe after the "s" as in teachers'.
7. "on going" should be "ongoing".
8. "Practise" should be the spelling "practice" as it is a noun rather than the verb "to practise": this is the kind of spelling error a spell-check may not identify.
9. This should be a colon, not a comma, because the student is introducing a quote which extends the first part of the sentence.
10. The quotation should be moved to a new line and indented because it is more than 40 words long, which means that quotation marks are not needed. They would be if the quote was less than 40 words.
11. The comma is not necessary but should be kept if the original source included it.
12. The page number of the quotation is needed. The quotation mark is not needed if the quote is set out appropriately.

Here's how the paragraph would look after careful proofreading:

Smith (1994) gave a few simple rules to the volunteers that could have implications for teachers' ongoing practice:

If the mistake doesn't make sense then prompt with a clue about the meaning of the story. If the mistake makes sense prompt with a clue about the way the word looks. If the reader does not say anything ask them to read to the end of the sentence or go back to the beginning of the sentence again (Smith, 1994, p. 23).