

Ten Easy Ways to Improve your Writing

If you would like clarification of any of these writing tips, please make an appointment to see an Academic Learning Advisor.

1. Understand the difference between written and spoken language

When we speak, we use not only words but also body language, voice tone and emphasis, and pauses to convey our message. In contrast, when we write, we need to use clear language and the correct grammar and punctuation to help the reader understand our meaning.

2. Use parallel structure

When you start a sentence using a certain grammatical structure, you must keep to that same structure throughout the sentence.

✘ I love eating pizza, reading thrillers, and to ride my bike.

Correction: ✓ I love **eating** pizza, **reading** thrillers, and **riding** my bike.

✘ The students learned that the timetable had changed and about the different classroom.

Correction: ✓ The students learned **that** the timetable had changed and **that** they would be in a different classroom.

3. Be consistent in your use of tenses

Do not move between the past and present tense.

✘ I **stayed** up all night finishing my assignment, and then Susan **gives** us all an extension.

Correction: ✓ I **stayed** up all night finishing my assignment, and then Susan **gave** us all an extension.

✘ The student **gives** an amazing performance and **collapsed** on the floor.

Correction: ✓ The student **gave** an amazing performance and **collapsed** on the floor.

OR The student **gives** an amazing performance and **collapses** on the floor.

4. Ensure subject-verb agreement

The subject and verb in a sentence must agree in number.

✘ The box of books have arrived.

The subject of the sentence is **box**, which is singular, so the verb must be singular too

Correction: ✓ The box of books **has** arrived.

✘ Heather and her sister grows potatoes.

The subject of the sentence is **plural**, two people, so the verb must be plural also.

Correction: ✓ Heather and her sister **grow** potatoes

5. Avoid dangling (unrelated) participles

The present participle is the –ing form of the verb (e.g., laughing) and the past participle usually ends in –ed (e.g., laughed).

When you use participles, you must make it clear the words to which they relate.

✘ Lying on the sofa reading a book, the back door opened silently.

Can a door lie on the sofa reading a book?

Correction: ✓ While Jane was lying on the sofa reading a book, the back door opened silently.

6. Avoid sentence fragments

Sentence fragments are incomplete sentences. They are often pieces of sentences that have been separated from the rest of the sentence by a full stop. Fragments do not make sense on their own.

There are two main types of sentence fragments:

1. The fragment has no subject or verb.

✘ Running down the street.

Who is running down the street? We need to add a **subject** and an *auxiliary* (helping) *verb*, to make the fragment into a complete sentence.

Correction: ✓ The **child** *was* running down the street.

2. The fragment adds extra information to the main sentence and often begins with **which**; it has a subject and a verb but does not make sense on its own. Sometimes, just the **punctuation** needs to be changed and a **capital** letter put into **lower case**.

✘ The student had misunderstood the question and needed to rewrite her assignment. **Which** is why she was not at the party on Saturday night.

Correction: ✓ The student had misunderstood the question and needed to rewrite her assignment, **which** is why she was not at the party on Saturday night.

✘ When the concert had finished and the applause had died away. **Everyone** hurried out of the theatre and climbed into the waiting buses.

Correction: ✓ When the concert had finished and the applause had died away, **everyone** hurried out of the theatre and climbed into the waiting buses.

7. Avoid comma fault/run-on sentences

Comma fault (also known as comma splice and run-on sentence) refers to the joining of two sentences by a comma instead of a full stop.

✘ Please let me know if you can help in this matter, I would appreciate your reply as soon as possible.

Correction:

✔ Please let me know if you can help in this matter. I would appreciate your reply as soon as possible.

NB. Each group of words is a complete sentence and therefore needs to be separated by a full stop.

- Sentences can be joined together using a comma and a conjunction (linking word), such as

and, but, or, nor, so, yet, because, although, e.g.,

It was a beautiful day, **so** we went to the beach.

I went to town yesterday, **but** I didn't buy anything.

- When two sentences are closely related or reflect each other, they can be joined together by a semicolon.

✘ Drivers think cyclists are a menace on the roads cyclists think drivers don't give them enough room.

Correction:

✔ Drivers think cyclists are a menace on the roads; cyclists think drivers don't give them enough room.

NB. The group of words on either side of the semicolon must be able to stand alone as a sentence. Remember, before the words **however** and **therefore**, you must use a semicolon or a full stop.

8. Use the comma correctly, especially in the following ways:

- After an introductory word or group of words, e.g.,

However, the line of argument is clear and consistent.

When he had finished his assignment, Marcus watched a DVD.

In 1969, man landed on the moon for the first time.

- Between the two parts of a compound sentence (one in which two or more simple sentences are joined together), e.g.,

Drivers think cyclists are a menace on the **road**, **but** cyclists think drivers don't give them enough room.

Women live longer than **men**, **and** they visit the doctor more often.

The tutor gave the students a month to complete their **assignments**, **yet** many had not finished by the due date.

9. Use clear language

Be careful using the following pronouns: **it**, **they**, and **this**.

- ✗ Education is essential for all children, and financial stability is important for everyone. The Government should provide **it**.

What should the Government provide, education or financial stability?

Correction: ✓ The Government should provide both of these essentials.

- ✗ The boss asked the workers to tidy up before the visitors arrived, so that **they** would enjoy the experience.

Who would enjoy the experience, the workers or the visitors?

Correction: ✓ The boss asked the workers to tidy up before the visitors arrived, so that the visitors would enjoy the experience.

- ✗ Rob worked hard and achieved his degree, supported throughout by his wife. **This** has led to his gaining a new job in the farming sector.

What has led to the new job: hard work, achieving a degree, or his wife's support?

Correction: ✓ Rob worked hard and achieved his degree, supported throughout by his wife. All three factors have led to his gaining a new job in the farming sector.

10. Use the correct word

- **Your** means *belonging to you*, e.g., **Your** slip is showing.
- **You're** is a contraction of *you are*, e.g., **You're** a genius.

- **Whose** means *belonging to whom*, e.g., **Whose** car has its lights on?
- **Who's** is a contraction of *who is*, e.g., **Who's** going to make the coffee?

- **Their** means *belonging to them*, e.g., **Their** car was stolen last night.

Their is NEVER followed by *is, are, was, were, will, should, would, or could*.

- **There** is used before the above words, e.g., **There** was an earthquake this morning.
- **There** often refers to a *place*, e.g., John lives **there**.
- **They're** is a contraction of *they are*, e.g., **They're** coming for dinner.

- **Its** means *belonging to it*, e.g., The cat ate **its** dinner.
- **It's** is a contraction of *it is* or *it has*, e.g., **It's** a beautiful day. **It's** been done.

- **Being** is a present participle and follows *is, are, was, and were*, e.g., She **was being** silly.
- **Been** is a past participle and follows *has* or *have*, e.g., They **have been** well taught.

- **Where** is to do with *place*, e.g., Home is **where** I can relax.
- **Were** is the past plural of the verb 'to be', e.g., The children **were** cheerful and relaxed.
- **We're** is a contraction of *we are*, e.g., **We're** now living in Otaki.

- **Affect** is a *verb*, meaning to influence or cause to change, e.g., Rain **affects** my mood.
- **Effect** is a *noun*, meaning the influence or the result, e.g., The **effect** of divorce on children can be huge.

- **Lose** is a *verb*, meaning to be unable to find something or to have something taken away, e.g., I often **lose** my car keys. I may **lose** my job.
- **Loose** is an *adjective*, meaning not firmly held or fixed in place, not fitting closely, e.g., These trousers are the wrong size for me as they are too **loose**.

A comprehensive list of easily confused words can be found at www.grammar-monster.com