Grammar, punctuation and spelling guide

1 Introduction

This introductory guide is designed to be useful to any students who would like some additional information on the complex workings of the English language. Those requiring a more detailed background should seek out one of the many excellent specialist texts on this subject.

All human languages are based on rules of grammar, punctuation and spelling. In particular, each language has its own system of grammar, which governs the ways that words can be combined. Without agreed rules, people would be unable to express or share their thoughts. There are also rules governing punctuation, the marks and symbols that clarify language in written form. Punctuation replaces the many pauses and changes of tone that people use to express themselves when language is spoken. Correct spelling is important because it avoids confusion over the meaning of written communication; spelling errors interrupt the flow of a message and make a poor impression on the reader.

2 Grammar and punctuation

Traditionally, the rules of grammar and punctuation were taught in the early years of schooling. Today, due to changes in teaching practice and less book-based study, there are many people around the world with little formal training in their native language. Some argue that there is no longer any need to learn or to follow what they see as ‘out-dated’ and ‘irrelevant’ rules. In fact, despite today’s increased reliance upon visual media, the need for correctly-structured language has never been greater. If you remain unconvinced, consider some common problems associated with poor grammar and punctuation:

- Receivers misinterpret the message, leading to incorrect responses and actions.
- Receivers waste time trying to check the intended meaning.
- Errors give a negative impression of the sender, who appears poorly educated, careless and un-professional.

On a more positive note, there are benefits to be gained from learning more about grammar, punctuation and the use of words:

- With a better understanding of its underlying laws, communicators can employ language in more focused, flexible and creative ways. In a world that is increasingly
filled with bland and sloppy messages, this is bound to result in more effective communication.

- Fluency in language is also associated with clear thinking, which benefits individuals, organisations and the wider public.

To check on the current state of your grammatical knowledge, complete the following ‘back to basics’ exercise.

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**Exercise 1: ‘back to basics’ – grammar**

(a) Write down a brief definition and two examples of each of the following:

- abstract noun
- adjective
- verb
- adverb
- proper noun
- pronoun
- conjunction
- preposition

(b) Express the following sentence in the **passive form**:

*Isabel threw the armchair carefully out of the upstairs window, but it missed her timid husband.*

(c) Identify the following ‘parts of speech’ in the sentence above:

- the subject
- the object
- the main (or ‘independent’) clause
- the subordinate (or ‘dependent’) clause

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**3 The terminology explained**

**Noun**: so-called ‘naming words’, of which there are four main varieties.

Concrete nouns e.g. *book, alligator, sunglasses, bicycle*

Abstract nouns e.g. *love, recession, humour, wisdom*
Proper nouns  e.g. Dublin, Tesco, Rosemary, Manchester United,
Collective nouns  e.g. team, crowd, flight (of swallows), pride (of lions)

**Pronoun:** words that take the place of a noun, often when referring to it a second time.

Personal pronouns  e.g. he, she, us, them, it
Demonstrative pronouns  e.g. this, that, these, those
Relative pronoun  e.g. who, which, whom, whose
Possessive pronoun  e.g. mine, yours, hers, theirs

**Adjective:** words that describe or explain a noun or a pronoun.

Descriptive adjective  e.g. the enormous mess, the red balloon
Possessive adjective  e.g. our company, her pet albatross
Quantitative adjective  e.g. twenty thousand customers, the first place

**Verb:** so-called ‘doing words’ that bring the sentence to life, and appear in various guises.

Finite verbs  e.g. he speaks to the sales force ... Jill danced the tango...
Infinite verbs  e.g. speaking to her mother ... after opening the brandy ...
Transitive verbs  e.g. I cut the cake ... the policeman kissed the Judge ...
Intransitive verbs  e.g. the sun shines ... the Mona Lisa smiles ...

Finite verbs are so-called because they are limited by person and by the time of the action (ie. past, present or future tense). Transitive verbs involve an action being ‘passed on’ to an object, whilst intransitive verbs do not (ie. the policeman kisses the Judge, but the sun does not ‘shine’ anything in particular).

**Adverb:** words that describe or modify a verb in various ways, answering questions such as:

How?  e.g. the accountant spoke monotonously
When?  e.g. our train left the station early
Where?  e.g. but I was waiting outside

Many adverbs can be obtained from the equivalent adjective by the ending ‘-ly’ (hence, ‘bright’ becomes ‘brightly’) though there are certain exceptions.
Preposition: words that explain the place of a noun or pronoun in the sentence.

How? e.g. leaving the country without a visa ...
Where? e.g. the protesters sitting on the roadway ...
When? e.g. the fax that arrived after the deadline ...

Prepositions can be confusingly similar to adverbs. In general, they precede the word which they are helping to explain.

Conjunction: words that link words, phrases and the clauses of a sentence, in two ways:

Subordinating e.g. we worked all night because you wanted the report ...
Coordinating e.g. this orchestra is famous and the venue is spectacular ...

If a conjunction is ‘subordinating’, it means that the meaning of one part of the sentence is dependent on another. For example, ‘you wanted the report’ is dependent on ‘we worked all night’. By contrast, coordinating conjunctions link words of equal value (e.g. bacon and egg) and clauses that can stand on their own (e.g. We sell houses and they sell jam).

4 The building blocks of a sentence

The easiest way to understand the various ways that sentences can be written is to construct one from scratch. The raw material of any sentence is a selection of words and prefabricated phrases. These can be assembled into a series of simple sentences, or alternatively into one compound or complex sentence.

Phrase In the morning
Simple sentence It is time for work
Simple sentence George gets out of bed
Simple sentence George gets dressed
Compound sentence In the morning, George gets out of bed and gets dressed.
Complex sentence In the morning, George gets out of bed and gets dressed because it is time for work.

Simple sentences are short, clear and easy to understand. However, to give the language greater interest and dramatic effect, it is important to use a variety of sentence constructions. Compound sentences are created by combining ‘free-standing’ clauses using conjunctions (‘and’ and ‘because’ in the examples above). Complex sentences are similar, but consist of one main (or ‘independent’) clause and one or more subordinate (or ‘dependent’) clauses. Hence, ‘It is time for work’ depends on the preceding clause for its meaning.
Sentences can be expressed in active or passive forms. In the *active* form, the subject does something to the object. In the *passive* form, this order is reversed. The subject of the sentence has something done to it by the object:

**Active:**
Isabel (*subject*) threw (*verb*) the armchair (*object*)
but it (*subject*) missed (*verb*) her timid husband (*object*) ... 

**Passive:**
The armchair (*subject*) was thrown (*verb*) by Isabel (*object*)
but her timid husband (*subject*) was missed (*verb*) by it (*object*) ...

## 5 Making better use of sentence structure

Once you have learnt to identify the various elements in a sentence, it is possible to write more varied and interesting prose. For example, you might want to introduce shorter sentences by replacing selected conjunctions with full stops. Other effects can be created by changing the order of main and subordinate clauses. You should also find it easier to edit other people’s text, in order to make it more readable and appropriate to its target readership. Section 3.4 of the textbook provides further guidance on improving the style of your written English. You can also learn a great deal by reading widely, including high quality newspaper and magazine journalism, non-fiction writing (e.g. popular science works by writers such as Richard Dawkins and Matt Ridley), and the work of modern novelists and poets. Consider, for example, the rich language of this early 19th century poem, and how it continues to communicate strong impressions of an early morning cityscape, two centuries after it was written:

**William Wordsworth**

*Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802*

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

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**Exercise 2: sentence construction**
Prepare examples of compound and complex sentences containing two, three, four and five clauses. In each case identify the conjunctions plus (in the complex sentences) the main and subordinate clauses. Rewrite each sentence as a series of simple sentences, punctuated with full stops. Note how the meaning and readability changes, depending on the sentence construction.

6 Correct punctuation

As the name suggests, punctuation is concerned with the ‘points’ or marks that are added to the text. Some people seem to distribute punctuation marks randomly, whilst others manage to avoid punctuation altogether. The aim of punctuation is to guide the reader, highlighting pauses and identifying the ending of one idea and the beginning of another. This is illustrated by the poem, reproduced above, where commas, semi colons and colons are used to structure the way it is to be read. Punctuation marks are also used to provide the reader with other useful information, such as identifying spoken words (i.e. quotations), showing ‘belonging’, emphasising particular statements and indicating that the writer is asking a question.

Exercise 3: getting to the point

Try adding the necessary punctuation and capital letters to the following sentences. If in doubt, try reading the sentence aloud; your pauses and changes of tone should help to identify where punctuation is needed. Solutions are provided at the end of this section:

(a) fellow shareholders my comments today are based on fifteen years service to the company i do appreciate your problems and can assure you that the directors want to resolve them as quickly calmly and effectively as possible thank you for your continuing support

(b) Its hopeless well never meet our sales target Angela cried as the mornings only customer left the shop she had spent £2.50 a whole week’s pocket money on her little brothers third birthday present

(c) the following four depots exceeded januaries performance figures portsmouth aberdeen chester and bath our thanks are due to all the staff concerned it was an exceptional effort well done
The essential punctuation guide

Full stop

A full stop indicates the end of a sentence. If your sentences are over-long, break them up by replacing a conjunction with a full stop and a capital letter. Full stops are sometimes used to indicate an abbreviation (e.g. *B.B.C. Television, U.S.A., Dr. Jeckill and Mr. Hyde*). However, as noted in Chapter 8, ‘open punctuation’ is now widely accepted. Full stops are omitted from abbreviations (as in *BBC Television*) but not from the ends of sentences.

Colon

A colon is sometimes used, as an alternative to a comma, to open a quotation (*As Groucho Marx once said: ‘I wouldn’t want to join a club that would have me as a member.’*). More commonly, it marks the beginning of a list. It is not good practice to follow a colon with a dash, a colon on its own will suffice.

Semi-colon

A semi-colon indicates a pause that falls somewhere between a comma and a full stop. It is most commonly used to split two clauses in a complex sentence in place of a conjunction (e.g. *Our new product range has been a great success; it has out-sold all of our main competitors*). Note how this pause acts to balance the sentence, adding emphasis to the words that follow it. In the above example, the obvious alternative would be to replace the semi-colon and the word ‘it’ with the conjunction ‘which’.

Comma

A comma signifies a short pause. It is used to separate items in a list and to mark out a subordinate clause or additional detail that breaks the flow of a sentence (e.g. *The year-end figures, released last Friday afternoon, revealed a dramatic improvement in retail margins... The President’s five year old daschund, Algernon, ate all the sandwiches ...*).

Single quotation marks / inverted commas

“...” Double quotation marks / inverted commas

Inverted commas are used to enclose spoken words and the titles of books, films and other publications. The following examples show how other punctuation marks are used within a quotation. Double inverted commas are only used where one quotation contains another item which also requires inverted commas. Here are some examples:

- *Asked what he thought of Western Civilisation, Mahatma Ghandi replied, ‘I think it would be a good idea.’*

- *During their visit, they went to see ‘A Doll’s House’, the classic play by Henrik Ibsen.*

- *The sales director commented, ‘I thought we could base the new advertising campaign on that “Four Weddings and a Funeral” theme tune. What do you think?’*
Exclamation mark

Question mark

These marks are used at the end of sentences, replacing full stops. They are sometimes over-used in advertising copy and other text, limiting their impact.

Hyphen

Dash

A hyphen is used to link two commonly associated words, especially where the adjacent letters of each word cannot easily be joined (e.g. co-operative, pre-election, self-employed, X-ray). However, once the combinations become widely used, the words are often merged together (e.g. multimedia, antisocial, cellphone). Dashes are sometimes used in place of brackets or commas. They do have a distinctive role, however, to mark a break or change of direction in a statement (e.g. ‘Emily said, I know a really great pub we could visit – but perhaps you have other plans?’). Technically, a dash should be longer than a hyphen. However, most keyboards only allocate one key for both marks, which are therefore becoming interchangeable.

Round brackets / parentheses

Square brackets / parentheses

Brackets separate additional information or ideas from the main flow of the sentence, including incidental details and references to other publications. Square brackets have a special function, enclosing words that have been inserted by someone other than the original writer in order to make a short extract of text comprehensible (e.g. As a leading conservationist suggested, ‘The [Scottish Highlands] region is surely one of the most beautiful in Europe (Gordon, 2005a) ...’)

Apostrophe

The apostrophe indicates possession (e.g. John’s motorbike). When the ‘owner’ is plural, the apostrophe normally moves to the end of the word. Hence, an individual athlete’s performance is distinguished from the team of athletes’ collective performance. One word that seems to cause particular problems in the business world is ‘company’. The full range of alternatives comprises:

Singular: Company
Singular possessive: This company’s managing director ...
Plural: Companies
Plural possessive: The top five companies’ financial results ...

Apostrophes are also used to show the kind of abbreviations that are common in spoken English (e.g. we’re, that’s, it’s, isn’t, don’t, won’t, wouldn’t are shortened versions of: we are, that is, it is, it is not, do not, will not, would not). These abbreviations are not normally used in written English, except when quoting a speaker or when making rough notes.
Omission marks / ellipsis

Three dots are used to signify that words have been omitted from a piece of text that you are quoting (e.g. ‘The great masses of the people ... will more easily fall victim to a great lie than to a small one.’). Without these omission marks, a quotation might be open to misinterpretation. For example, the shortened version might have missed out an important subsidiary clause, that modifies the statement. To take an extreme example, if the statement, ‘I agree that you should go ahead with the house purchase, subject to a satisfactory survey, and wish you all the best.’, was shortened without omission marks, it would read: ‘I agree that you should go ahead with the house purchase and wish you all the best.’ In this case, the marks would not help a great deal, but they should alert the reader to the fact that something has been left out of the quotation.

7 Bringing it all together

It is not possible to cover the many complexities of the English language in this short guide. However, the exercises should help to demonstrate the dramatic improvements that can be achieved by a more careful use of words, grammar and punctuation. Additional background material can be found in the Chapter 3 text and its Further Reading recommendations. The key to improving your writing style is to be self-critical, re-reading text to ensure that it expresses your intended meaning. The following checklist highlights some of the more common pitfalls.

Drafting better text: a six point checklist

1. **Is the spelling correct?**: Some words are particularly easy to mis-spell (e.g. accommodate, committee, correspondence, embarrass, gauge, manoeuvre, receive recommendation, subtlety, unnecessary, wholly, yield). Spell-checks on a wordprocessor may help, but these should never be used to replace words automatically, because they tend to turn some proper nouns into meaningless alternatives. If you think that your spelling is a weak point, make it a priority to get your written work checked. Try some self-improvement by noting down and learning each mis-spelt word. Remember the warning of a certain Leeds nightclub bouncer: ‘I turn away people with moustaches, or with facial tattoos that are spelt wrongly.’

2. **Have I used the correct word?**: Some words (called ‘homonyms’ or ‘homophones’), sound similar to one another but have an entirely different meaning. Amongst the words most commonly confused are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>affect</th>
<th>effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>alternate</td>
<td>alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aural</td>
<td>oral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>break</td>
<td>brake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compliment</td>
<td>complement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
council: counsel
definite: definitive
dependent: dependant
discrete: discreet
enquiry: inquiry
farther: further
metre: meter
moral: morale
personal: personnel
principle: principal
precede: proceed
review: revue
stationery: stationary.

If you are unsure of the differences between these words, check the meanings in a dictionary; spell-checking software will not help with this problem.

3. **Are subjects and verbs consistent?** In a simple sentence, errors in agreement are easy to identify (e.g. ‘The DVD recorders was not stolen, they is only borrowed’). However, in longer sentences and extended text, it is easy to mix different tenses and to confuse singular with plural forms. It is therefore best to decide at the outset whether, for example, you are writing in the present or past tense, and in the first person (‘I think that …’) or passive form (‘It is thought that …’).

4. **Are verbs being over-stretched?** Do not expect one verb to express both past and future activity, or the actions of different subjects. Consider the sentence: ‘Throughout the past year, the charity was well managed, effective in delivery and ready to face the challenges that lie ahead.’ To clarify the writer’s meaning, an additional verb is needed: ‘Throughout the past year the charity was well managed and effective in delivery. It is ready to face the challenges that lie ahead.’

5. **Are sentences overly complex?** As the previous example demonstrated, longer sentences can usually be broken into their component clauses. Shorter sentences increase the readability of text, especially when shorter words are used. This is particularly important if your message is designed for audiences with a range of reading abilities. Documents such as instruction manuals, tax returns and social security forms need to be written using simple vocabulary and sentence structures.

6. **Are certain words or phrases over-used?** Everyone has their own ‘favourite’ words and phrases, but their repeated use does become tedious for the reader. When re-reading a section of text, look out for frequent repetition, especially where they are located close to one another. Depending on the context, most words can be replaced with equivalents from the thesaurus, whilst pronouns make a suitable substitute for repetitive nouns.
Exercise 4: editing text

Editing is a useful skill to develop. If you are working in a group, spend half an hour preparing a ‘poorly constructed’ short report on a topic of your choice (alternatively, your tutor may be able to provide you with practice material). Exchange reports with other students, and spend a further period editing and re-drafting the report. Additional guidance is given in Sections 3.2 and 9.7 of the textbook.

(a) correct the grammar, punctuation and spelling in the original version.
(b) re-write the text so that it is clearer and more interesting as well as error-free.
(c) compare the ‘before’ and ‘after’ versions of the report.

Exercise 5: drafting text

Select a topic of your choice which should involve some specialist technical information (e.g. an economic theory, a medical treatment or an engineering problem). Prepare three extracts (maximum 500 words each) covering exactly the same information, but presented in a format that is suitable for each the following readers:

(a) A specialist in your subject area
(b) A general reader with no specialist knowledge
(c) A child aged about nine OR an adult with limited knowledge of English (specify your choice)

Note how vocabulary, sentence structure and overall style need to alter in order to convey the message effectively.

Exercise 3: getting to the point – solutions

(a) Fellow shareholders, my comments today are based on fifteen years’ service to the company. I do appreciate your problems, and can assure you that the Directors want to resolve them as quickly, calmly and effectively as possible. Thank you for your continuing support.

(b) ‘It’s hopeless, we’ll never reach our sales target!’ Angela cried, as the morning’s only customer left the shop. She had spent £2.50, a whole week’s pocket money, on her little brother’s third birthday present.

(c) The following four depots exceeded January’s performance figures: Portsmouth, Aberdeen, Chester and Bath. Our thanks are due to all the staff concerned; it was an excellent effort. Well done!