FOUR

Other Stuff You Should Know

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Feedback

Where to Get Help

Writing shouldn't be lonely. I understand that you often need to pound out something quickly and turn it in on time for class, but ideally, if you're writing more than one draft of a paper, you'll have a chance to get more pairs of eyes on whatever you write. Below are some common sources of help you might choose. No matter which of these you use, it's important to let whoever is helping you know as much as they can about the assignment: show them a copy of the syllabus or the assignment rubric if your instructor has provided them.

Peer Feedback

Many instructors use peer feedback in writing classes. It can feel a bit weird to comment on your classmates' drafts, but it helps in three big ways:

- you get to see how other people are approaching the assignment
- you get to see what "works" for you as a reader
- you get advice on how your paper looks to readers.

More people commenting on your paper = more chances to make it better. You might even consider seeking advice from a friend or roommate who isn't in your class. You don't have to follow all the advice you get from peers, because you know best what you want your paper to do, but you should consider it. One thing to note: writing instructors usually discourage peer feedback on grammar errors, especially early on, because we want you to focus on the ideas and overall vibe of the text (and also because not everyone gives good grammar advice, to be honest).

Writing Centre

Usually, your campus will have a place where you can go to get help with writing. Sometimes it's called the "writing centre"; other times, it may be called something like the "learning centre" or "learning commons" or some other name. Whatever it's called, you can expect the following:

- A one-on-one session with someone who is trained in responding to writing. Maybe a peer (a fellow undergraduate), or a graduate student who is studying something related to writing, or even a professional tutor who is more like a writing professor.
- General advice on how to improve your assignment in a "big picture" way – things like organization, expression of main ideas, and so on.

- Most likely, a reluctance to "fix" problems with your paper. Generally, writing centres see their mission as helping you to develop your own awareness and skills so you can improve your writing on your own.

A Paid Private Tutor or Editor

You may find that a private language-focused tutor or editor will be more willing to offer direct feedback on things like grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure. This can be helpful (and expensive!) but make sure you're not violating your university's academic-integrity policy: many schools will prohibit "unauthorized" editing. When in doubt, check with your instructor. I don't think professors should be scared of students seeking paid editorial help – after all, we do it too. (My writing is always much better when I pay an editor to help me check for errors, fix my citations, and so on before I submit something for publication!)

Grammarly, Spellcheck in Microsoft Word, or Other Software

These things can be helpful, but they can also be wrong, and can never replace a human reader. They can catch some big obvious mistakes, but because they're automatic, they overgeneralize rules in ways that often do not make sense and can easily "misinterpret" what you're trying to do in your sentences. (Really, they don't "interpret"

at all, they just automatically apply rules.) A good program like this is better than nothing, but barely.

TL;DR: It's always best to have someone other than yourself read something you write, and give you suggestions on how to improve it, before you turn it in. It's up to you whether to follow their advice, though. Software can help, but it's not perfect.

Vocabulary

Academic Words

I wish I could just give you a list of a thousand words and tell you that if you memorize them all, you'll be ready to read and understand anything. Sadly, it doesn't work that way.

Even if I could give you a list, it wouldn't be complete. Let's say that you know the word *concept,* which seems to appear in a lot of academic texts. (It means something like "a big, general idea.") Even if you felt comfortable with that word, you'd still have to make sure you know all other forms of it, like *conception, concepts, conceptual, conceptualization, conceptualize, conceptualized, conceptualizes, conceptualizing, and conceptually.* One word is now ten.

So instead of a list, I'll give you a few general principles, and some suggestions on where to look.

First, there are some general "academic words" – which really just means words that happen to appear more in texts that are used in universities and by scholars and researchers – that you should make sure you understand when you're reading. The best source I know for this is something called the Academic Word List, which was put

together by Averil Coxhead from Victoria University of Wellington, in New Zealand. She did a *ton* of research, looking at millions and millions of words in academic texts, and created a list of the 570 most common words in academic English (not counting really common words that are used outside of academia as well, like *the* or *and* or *be* or *do*).

If you know these academic words, understand them when you read them, and use them correctly in your own writing, it will help a lot. I don't have a plan for how you should do this, but if you do an internet search for "academic word list," you'll get a lot of information and websites that have this list and ways to study it.

Second, depending on what you're studying, you'll find you have to learn *a more specialized vocabulary* – sometimes you hear people use the word *jargon* to describe this. For example, I studied English literature when I was an undergraduate, so I had to know what something called "iambic pentameter" was. (It's a kind of poetry that Shakespeare used. Don't worry, you don't have to know it.)

On the other hand, I didn't study economics, so while I know that "supply and demand" is something you hear economists talk about, I don't exactly know its technical, specific meaning within the field of economics. But you should, if that's your major.

Academic Phrases

In addition to specific words, there are also a lot of phrases that are commonly used in academic texts, and it's helpful to know them for both reading and your own writing.

Some researchers refer to these as "moves" that are commonly made in academic writing. The most famous example of this is what the researcher John Swales calls Creating a Research Space (CARS), something that writers of academic articles often do when they begin by establishing the importance of an area of research, argue that something is missing from that area, and explain how their own paper will fill that missing gap.

I can't list every single possible phrase, but in the case of CARS, here are some of the phrases writers might use:

The concepts of X and Y are central to ...

Very little is currently known about X in ...

Evidence suggests that X is among the most important factors for ...

One of the most significant current discussions in X is ...

I borrowed these from something called the Academic Phrasebank, which was compiled by John Morley at the

University of Manchester. I highly recommend its use – it lists hundreds and hundreds of common phrases, taken from real academic papers, organized by their purpose. Morley doesn't consider reusing the Academic Phrasebank phrases to be plagiarism, for the most part, and I think he's right. You can search for it online and even buy an entire PDF file of the phrasebook for under ten dollars.

TL;DR: There are a lot of words and phrases that are more commonly used in academic writing than in other kinds of communication. The best way to learn them is to read a lot, and there are resources like the Academic World List and the Academic Phrasebank that can help.

Grammar

Grammar is the most important part of writing and language, but we can't really address it separately from any other part of language, because it's baked in. Everything is grammar. Diane Larsen-Freeman, a scholar who is probably one of the world's leading experts on teaching grammar, doesn't even call it "grammar"; she calls it "grammaring," to show that it's an active part of using language.

Most grammar resources are lists of things you shouldn't do. Personally, I have little to say about how to avoid grammar *errors,* because different people struggle with different things, and a lot of grammar advice is subjective. Rather than trying to "learn grammar," you'll do better if you practise writing, get feedback on where you might be making grammatical mistakes, and then learn more about how to fix those mistakes.

There are a few grammar things that I think you need to know, but keep in mind that everyone has different needs. Below, I have two pieces of advice based on issues I see in a lot of my own students' writing. It's totally subjective, but I believe strongly that I'm right and that everyone else's grammar advice is just folk tales and superstition. Here it is:

1 Ninety-five percent (or more) of the time *you can't join independent clauses* (basically sentences, things that have a noun and a verb that work together) *with commas* in English. You can do it in some other languages, but not this one. In formal written English, you have to use a conjunction, a semicolon, or a period.

NO **It was snowing, we went outside.**
OK **It was snowing, and we went outside**
OK **It was snowing; we went outside.**
OK **It was snowing. We went outside.**
OK **It was snowing, so we went outside**
OK **It was snowing, but we went outside.**

2 On a related note, you've got to be careful about where the punctuation goes when you use the word *however,* because if you're not, you might end up trying to join independent clauses with a comma again, which, like I said, you can't do in English.

NO **It was snowing, however, we went outside.**
NO **It was snowing, however; we went outside.***
NO **It was snowing however, we went outside.**

* Technically, this one could be OK if you had some stuff in the sentences before and after it that made the ***however*** function differently, like "It was very cold that day, and we had been planning to spend the day indoors. It was snowing, however; we went outside. No kid can resist the chance to play in the snow."

NO **It was snowing however; we went outside.**
OK **It was snowing; however, we went outside.**
OK **It was snowing. However, we went outside.**

That's it. Those are two things I think a lot of people get wrong and that you should pay attention to.

For everything else, I recommend that you:

- use a writing centre's website (e.g., Purdue University's Online Writing Lab)
- get a grammar textbook (see the "Further Reading" section)
- take a grammar class.

If you're really serious about understanding how grammar works, take a grammar or linguistics class in your university's English or Linguistics department. This might sound boring, but you'll learn a ton, especially if you grew up speaking English and never had to think about English grammar because it was already just in your head. I took grammar classes twice when I was a student, and I'd do it again if I had time.

TL;DR: Grammar can't be separated from any other part of language. Lots of people use commas wrong, so learn the right way. Get a grammar reference book or take a grammar class if you can.

Sentences

Sentences are important, obviously. They don't have to be complicated. They should be clear and concise and relatively simple and not all that long.

The most important thing to know about them is that you should use a variety of types of sentences. To demonstrate this, I'm going to write three paragraphs below, each of which offers advice about sentences. See if you can figure out which one sounds the best.

Short sentences. It's OK to write short sentences. These are called "simple sentences." They're often short. They're pretty much just a subject and a verb. Sometimes they include other things. Another short kind of sentence is a "compound sentence." Those have a conjunction (like *and)* in them. You can write simple sentences and compound sentences, and they will both feel pretty simple.

Long sentences. Of course, if you use nothing but simple or compound sentences, your writing can begin to seem overly simplistic and dull, in which case you may want to consider the benefits of using more complicated types of sentences

known as “complex sentences.” These are sentences that have independent clauses (which usually just have subjects and verbs) but also have dependent clauses that can (for example) start with words like “which” or “that.”

There are even “compound-complex sentences,” which start stacking up all kinds of clauses in ways that can be somewhat tricky to follow, but which, if written well, can allow you to explore a number of different connected ideas while not losing your sense of “flow,” though they can also start to feel unnecessarily long and complicated, especially if they happen again and again and again in a row.

Varied sentences. The point is: vary your sentence patterns. Simple sentences are too simple, and if you use a lot of them, your writing can seem brusque and choppy, as in paragraph no. 1 above. Compound-complex sentences, though useful when needed, can become needlessly long. You can end up confusing readers if you use them all the time, as in paragraph no. 2. Ideally, you’ll use all different types of sentences. The first paragraph in this sequence felt too simple. The second one felt too complicated. This one is (I think) just right, and it’s because of the variation in sentence patterns, which somehow feels more natural and readable.

TL;DR: Use a variety of long (compound, complex, compound-complex) and short (simple) sentences throughout your paper.