

Week 14 Self-learning materials

Academic writing-grammar

To write effectively and authoritatively, you need to use accurate grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation.

Some of the most common grammar problems in student writing are:

Subject-verb agreement

In English, the verb must agree with its subject, so a singular subject will have a singular verb and a plural subject, a plural verb. It is, however, easy to make mistakes when the subject is complex. For example:

The integration of the telecommunication systems **were** successful.

In this example, the verb 'were' is plural. This is **incorrect** because the verb should agree with the head noun 'integration', which is singular. If we ask 'What was successful?', the answer would be 'the integration of the telecommunications systems', not just 'the systems' or 'the telecommunications systems'. This shows that the verb must agree with the noun 'integration'. The **correct** sentence is therefore:

The integration of the telecommunication systems **was** successful.

It is unlikely that the grammar check in your computer will detect this type of error, so it is important to be alert.

Pronoun reference

A pronoun must agree with its antecedent (i.e. the noun to which the pronoun refers) and the relationship between the two must be clear and unambiguous. **Vague pronoun reference occurs when this relationship is not clear.** For example:

Traditional extraction methods have many benefits, including producing oils with a low moisture content, but mechanical extraction methods produce higher yields. Chemical and nutritional analysis has shown that **they** vary widely depending on the variety of nut used.

There are several plural nouns in this paragraph, and it is not clear which noun the pronoun 'they' in the second sentence refers to. Using the noun 'yields' instead of the

pronoun 'they' solves the problem in this case:

Traditional extraction methods have many benefits, including producing oils with a low moisture content, but mechanical extraction methods produce higher yields. Chemical and nutritional analysis has shown that **yields** vary widely depending on the variety of nut used.

Vague pronoun reference is a common cause of ambiguity in student writing. In some cases, replacing the pronoun with a noun is not enough to remove the ambiguity: if the meaning is still unclear after doing this, you may have to rephrase one or more sentences to achieve clarity.

Consistency in the use of tenses

It is important to use tenses consistently unless there is a good reason for a change. Look at the following examples:

1. He **missed** the lecture yesterday. That's not unusual, though. He only **attends** once in a while.

2. The data for the study were collected over a three-week period. First, a questionnaire was distributed to all participants. Then, semi-structured interviews **are** conducted with eight of the participants to explore emerging issues.

In the first example there is a shift in tense, but this is justified because, while the first sentence refers to past time (yesterday), the second and third sentences refer to habitual behavior, for which the present tense is used.

In the second example, however, the change in tense in the last sentence is not appropriate because the action being described also happened in the past.

The **correct tense** in the second sentence is therefore the simple past:

The data for the study were collected over a three-week period. First, a questionnaire was distributed to all participants. Then, semi-structured interviews **were** conducted with eight of the participants to explore emerging issues.

Careful proofreading will help you to avoid this type of mistake.

Indirect questions

Indirect questions have the grammatical form of a statement; that is to say, there is no

subject-verb inversion. Subject-verb inversion occurs only in direct questions. It is, however, usual to see indirect questions in student writing as follows:

The residents asked why had the electricity been cut.

The students asked what should they revise for the exam.

The word order in both sentences is incorrect. The correct sentences are:

The residents asked why the electricity had been cut.

The students asked what they should revise for the exam.

It is easy to make mistakes like these, so you should always check word order in indirect questions very carefully when proofreading your work before submission.

Avoid run-on sentences

In a 'run-on' sentence, two separate ideas, each constituting a complete grammatical unit (or independent clause), are joined with no punctuation or conjunction. Sometimes, a comma is used to separate the two clauses. This is also incorrect. Here are two examples:

Incorrect: The disease has now spread from densely-populated urban areas to isolated rural villages this gives cause for concern because there are few medical facilities in these remote areas.

Incorrect: The disease has now spread from densely-populated urban areas to isolated rural villages, this gives cause for concern because there are few medical facilities in these remote areas.

Since the examples above contain two separate ideas, and each is in a grammatically complete unit, a full stop is needed after the word 'villages'. The correct punctuation is:

Correct: The disease has now spread from densely-populated urban areas to isolated rural villages. This gives cause for concern because there are few medical facilities in these remote areas.

It is not unusual to see occurrences of 'run-on' sentences in student writing.