

Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar in Academic Writing

Spelling, punctuation and grammar are important aspects of academic writing and any formal written communication. Checking these elements of your writing carefully is part of cultivating the formal tone and reliable voice of a good piece of academic writing which your reader can place their trust in.

Remember, it is rare (in fact, probably impossible!) to get everything 'right' in a piece of writing first time. Setting aside time for editing and proofreading is key. This will help you focus on the process of communicating your ideas.

Above all, keep the main principles of academic writing in mind: clarity, efficiency and accuracy. Conveying your meaning to the reader is most important job.

This guide is designed to help you through some of the most common issues found in academic writing related to spelling, punctuation, and grammar. At the end of the guide, you will also find a [glossary](#) of grammatical terms to help you understand these aspects of academic writing and to tackle any more technical feedback.

There is no need to read the whole guide; focus on your feedback and the areas you have identified as important to work on. You can use the Contents below to jump to the topic you would like to find out more about.

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SPELLING

Spellchecker (and other tools)

Writing tools can augment your own careful checking and understanding of the spelling, punctuation and grammar in a document. As well as resulting in better communication overall, getting spelling right will give your work a professional finish.

- Check your spellchecker is set to **UK English** (in Word > Review Tab > Language > Set proofing language).
- US and UK spellings are slightly different; **UK spelling is generally preferred**.
 - E.g., **foetus** rather than **fetus**, **labour** rather than **labor**, **unravelling** rather than **unraveled**.
 - Note that the guidelines and advice in this section refer to UK English spelling.

If there are alternative correct spellings of a word (and there are lots of variant spellings and quirks in English), pick one and stick with it throughout your piece of work.

- In MS Word, the find and replace tool can help you bulk correct errors or changes quickly across a document.
- MS Word Editor will also help you to check for common spelling and grammar errors, as well as provide more general writing advice (found under the review tab).
- Use a grammar guide like Fowler (2015) or Garner (2016) to explore entries on spelling, or look online for lists of commonly misspelled words, especially if you are trying to proactively improve. These types of quick reference resources can also help with identifying spelling patterns and rules if you notice an error recurring in your work. You may want to try keeping a list of vocabulary for your own reference.

Common spelling issues

Some common spelling errors in academic writing to be aware of include:

i before e

- You may have learnt the rule 'i before e, except after c' (e.g. receive, perceive) and this is generally useful, just watch for exceptions (e.g. either, their, seize, height, society), science). Most likely the spellchecker will catch these, but worth consideration when it comes to proofreading.

Homophones:

- Homophones are words that sound the same (or similar) but are spelled differently. Some examples of the most common errors include: there, their and they're; your and you're; of and off; as and have; accept and except.

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- Spellchecking tools may catch these, and of course you will be avoiding contraction (such as they're or you're). If you are not sure about a word, never be afraid to look it up.

Commonly confused words and spelling queries in academic writing

Here are some of the spelling queries that come up often; unfortunately not all of them will be caught by a spellchecker!

Affect and Effect

Technically both of these can be either a verb (doing word) or a noun (thing), but in academic writing generally the use of **affect as a verb** and **effect as a noun** are most common. For example:

The **effect** of the pollutant on the wider biosphere remains unknown. (effect as noun)

It is not known how large the area **affected** is. (affect as verb)

You may occasionally see effect used as a verb in academic writing, for example:

The project has now **effected** reform across the health service. (effect as verb, i.e., made something aimed for actually happen).

Other uses, which you can find more information about in a dictionary, are less common in academic writing. For example, affect as an adjective ('his manner of speech was somewhat affected'). A dictionary can also help with any subject-specific technical uses of these words.

Practice and Practise

In UK English, the noun 'practice' and verb 'practise' are distinguished by the slight difference in spelling (with a c and an s respectively). For example:

Best practice is to document all decisions. (practice, noun)

Essay writing becomes more fluent with practice. (practice, uncountable noun)

She practised medicine internationally for the last ten years. (practise, verb)

Advice and Advise

In this case again, 'advice' is a noun, and 'advise' is the verb. For example:

The **advice** is provided for patients in leaflet form. (noun)

Practitioners **advise** patients to consult the leaflet carefully. (verb)

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Complement and Compliment

Just one change in vowel and the meaning changes! Example:

It was good to receive a **compliment** in my feedback. (compliment = praise; think, 'I like a compliment!')

The lesson plan **complements** the theoretical discussion. (complement = goes with, fits together well)

Led and lead

Led is the correct spelling for the past tense of the verb 'to lead'. For example:

The team of eight were **led** by a psychologist.

Until and 'till', 'til', or 'untill'

Just 'until' please! For example:

Until a solution is found, the problem will continue to frustrate mathematicians.

Some words are just not spelt in the way that they sound: this is perhaps why 'definitely' often appears in place of the correct 'definitely' in essays. You might have also noticed in this section that 'spelled' and 'spelt' are both acceptable in UK English (!).

If in doubt, consult a dictionary (or the relevant style guide if using one).

Plural endings

Forming most regular plural nouns in English involves adding an 's' on the end; however, this can change depending on what letter/s a word ends with (e.g. rush becomes rushes, family becomes families), and (as with many languages) there are also irregular plurals (e.g. mice not mouses; fish stays fish, not fishes; analysis becomes analyses etc.).

If you are finding these are often causing issues in your work, do proactively seek resources and support. Try searching online resources on plural endings in English, and support teams within Learning Services and the Language Centre may also be able to signpost you to helpful sources and develop learning strategies.

ABBREVIATIONS

General

Only use abbreviations when you want to avoid lots of repetition of a lengthy or common phrase in an essay. Ensure that the first time you introduce the abbreviation it is given in brackets following the full use of the phrase it represents. For example:

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The National Health Service (NHS) was founded in 1948.

This ensures the reader knows what the abbreviation refers to in the following discussion and therefore that your work remains easy to follow.

E.g. and i.e.

In general, **old-fashioned Latin abbreviations are to be avoided**. However, you may find yourself using:

- e.g. (*exempli gratia*) 'for example' - to precede single or multiple examples
 - A variety of apples can be used (e.g., Cox, Braeburn, Granny Smith).
- i.e. (*id est*) 'that is' - to explain or specify something further
 - For a dry cider, an apple like the Kingstone Black (i.e., a bitter-sharp variety) is best.

They are often found used in brackets and may be followed by a comma. Just think of the full English phrase when using them and punctuate in the same way.

You can find more on abbreviations in the punctuation section below, under full stops.

[A note on et al. in Edge Hill Harvard Referencing](#)

Edge Hill Harvard referencing also makes use of et al. within in-text citations of items that have three or more authors. Et al. is an abbreviation of a Latin phrase meaning 'and others', and this is why it always has a full stop coming along with it in this style of referencing (Author et al., 2023).

As with the above Latin abbreviations, keep the full phrase in mind when proofreading to ensure your verb agrees with the plural subject of 'X and others...' (a very common error!).

Example:

Correct (Plural form of the verb to argue, in agreement with plural subject):

Hirsch et al. (2020) **argue** climate science has become apolitical and fragmented.

(Think: Hirsch and others argue....)

Incorrect (Singular form of the verb to argue, not matching the plural subject):

Hirsch et al. (2020) **argues** climate science has become apolitical and fragmented.

(Not: Hirsch and others argues.....!)

GRAMMAR, SYNTAX and PUNCTUATION

The following sections look in more depth at areas that can improve your academic writing and help you to avoid the most common errors, with further advice and illustrative examples.

General advice on sentence structure (syntax)

In this section we look at some general rules to help you be direct and clear.

Offer your main point as soon as possible, at the beginning of a paragraph, and by employing the [active voice](#) in your sentences (more below).

Review sentence length. Very long sentences (try reading aloud!) or sentences with a confusing structure can hamper your message and cost you marks. Incomplete or fragment sentences may appear note-like and not convey a developed thought or enough information. The [glossary](#) and [grammar](#) sections of the guide offer further explanation, if you would like it, of what makes a complete sentence and how to make sure you have all the elements you need.

Try and keep in mind that grammar helps us to get our message across to our audience – so if something is just not working, try rewriting the sentence a different way.

A short break can also do wonders and help you switch from deeply involved ‘writer’ (focused on the content and its meaning) to a more objective ‘editor’ (focused on the reader and communication of meaning). UniSkills’ [editing and proof-reading resources](#) offer more advice.

Some common syntactical issues:

Active and passive voice

While there is no ban on using passive voice (and this varies by subject too), in general being alert to the active voice in your writing can help you to craft shorter, more direct, and clearer sentences.

Consider, for *example*, this simple sentence in the active voice:

The nurse advises the patient.

The nurse [subject] – advises [verb, active form] – the patient [object].

The nurse is the grammatical subject, that is, the actor carrying out the action of the verb (doing word) in the sentence. The grammatical object (in this case, the patient) is on the receiving end of that action.

Now compare the same information conveyed in the passive voice:

The patient is advised by the nurse.

The patient [object] – is being advised/is advised [verb, passive form] – by [preposition]– the nurse [subject].

The sentence becomes longer and clunkier. Passive voice can also tempt the writer into using a present continuous form of the verb (e.g. 'is being advised') which often reads less well and uses up more word count than the simple active form.

In isolation, and in a simple sentence, this may not seem significant. However, in a longer and more complex sentence (especially worked into paragraphs of argumentation in an essay) passive voice can hinder meaning, so it is worth being able to spot the difference when editing your work for clarity and brevity.

Variation in phrases, clauses and sentences

Academic writing is somewhat repetitive by nature; communicating your thoughts clearly and pressing a sustained argument throughout a piece of writing often results in a need to be more explicit and direct, and to keep returning to the same sorts of statement more often than in other types of prose. However, resources such as [Academic Phrasebank](#) and [The Student Phrasebook](#) can help introduce variation to your style, understand clauses better by their function, and get ideas about how to get something on the page when you are feeling stuck.

Referring back: 'This...' at the beginning of sentences

When proofreading and editing your work, review any sentences that begin with 'This....'.

'This' helpfully refers back to what came before – great! – but do be sure that what you are referring back to is abundantly clear to the reader. As academic writing involves complex sentences, lots of information, and requires repeated editing, it can be prone to confuse! Here is an **example**:

Trainees carried out one-to-one interviews, focus groups, distribution of surveys and tailored questionnaires. This was effective in the initial phases of the study.

In the example, it remains a little ambiguous what precisely 'this' refers back to and leaves the writer's meaning unclear. In this case, adding in the subject would solve the problem and clarify the meaning of the reference for the reader:

.... This multiple-method strategy was effective....

.... This deployment of junior colleagues was effective....

Also be alert to phrases such as ‘This study...’ (is it clear which one? And have you cited it?). Don’t underestimate how direct you need to be in academic writing.

Rhetorical questions (Direct and Indirect Questions)

In academic writing generally, authors are aiming to inform readers and raise questions, but not to interrogate them directly! For this reason, direct questions (or rhetorical questions) are to be avoided.

Whilst they can work well to engage an audience in introducing debates when presenting orally, this is often not the case on the page where they can lack clarity about who exactly is asking and answering the question.

Example:

Direct/rhetorical:

So, should the use of online information ever be a cause for concern?

(As a reader coming across this you may well think: ‘well, should it? You tell me!’)

Indirect:

In future, researchers should ask whether the use of online information is ever a cause for concern.

This essay will debate whether the use of online information is ever a cause for concern.

If you find yourself typing a question mark, go back and have a think about whether it is appropriate.

PROOFING PUNCTUATION

This section takes you through the main functions of punctuation common in academic writing, and addresses some of the most common issues to look out for when proof-reading your work.

A better understanding of the functions of punctuation will help improve syntax and overall written expression in your work.

Apostrophes:

What are apostrophes for?

There are two uses for the apostrophe:

1. To indicate possession (ownership)
2. To mark contraction (letters or words omitted)

The possessive apostrophe

The possessive apostrophe follows directly after the person, people or thing/s that own/s something.

Examples:

Singular possession (one owner)

- The student's book (one book belongs to one student)
- The student's books (several books belong to one student)
- A year's work (the work of one year)
- A person's rights (the rights of one person)

Plural possession (more than one owner)

- The students' book (one book belongs to several students)
- The students' books (several books belong to several students) • Three years' work (the work of three years)

Collective nouns with possessive apostrophes

This can sometimes appear confusing when a collective noun is involved (i.e., a noun that is grammatically singular but refers to a plural entity). For example:

- People's rights (the rights of all people)
- Indigenous peoples' rights (the rights of several indigenous peoples, i.e., several groups of people)
- The family's view is.... (the view of one family)
- The families' views are.... (the views of several families)
- The audience's reaction on the night....
- The audiences' reactions to the play across the tour.... • The children's play area

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Note the common shorthand which uses a plural noun to refer to time periods does not require the use of an apostrophe. For example, 1800s (for 'the eighteen-hundreds') or 1970s (for 'the nineteen-seventies').

Common issues related to possession:

Whose (possession) and Who's (who is)

Mark Rothko, **whose** abstract expressionist paintings instituted colour-field painting, was born in....

If you find yourself instead writing - **who's** - in an essay, then delete!

Who's is a [contraction](#) of 'who is'. It therefore does not indicate possession, and in any case, is too informal for academic writing.

The s' versus s's debate – possession with a name (proper noun)

You will sometimes see disagreement about how to indicate possession with a name (proper noun).

For example, in referring to the *Ghost Stories* of (i.e. belonging to) the novelist Henry James:

The work has been compared to Henry **James's** *Ghost Stories*....

The work has been compared to **Henry James'** *Ghost Stories*....

In fact, both are correct: this is a stylistic choice. Most modern style guides (and online copy) tend to favour the simpler second option of just one s. As ever, be consistent in your choice.

Possessive pronouns

We also indicate possession using common possessive pronouns such as her, his, its or their. These need no apostrophe.

Example:

Her study of photosynthesis was a major contribution to the field. **Its** main quality was the thorough analysis of tropical mosses.

Indefinite pronouns

These are words such as 'somebody', 'one', 'everybody'. These **do need** an apostrophe adding to indicate possession.

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Examples:

One's analysis must undergo a series of rigorous checks to ensure accuracy.

Though 'one' does sometimes appear in academic writing, it is largely considered old fashioned. Indefinite pronouns (as the name suggests!) are usually either too vague to use in academic writing ('somebody has argued' is not going to impress) or too absolute to convey critical thinking ('everybody should be concerned with....'). For these reasons, they are best avoided in most cases.

Apostrophes to mark contractions

Contractions are when words are run together to produce a shortened version (closer to spoken language) and apostrophes are used to mark the missing letters.

Contractions are not used in academic writing, so unless they are part of a quotation, **write the contraction out in full**. This is in order to maintain a formal tone.

Examples:

Correct: The evidence **does not** show a consistent pattern of school attendance.

Incorrect: The evidence **doesn't show** a consistent pattern of school attendance.

Correct: Replication problems **can't** be avoided.

Incorrect: Replication problems **cannot** be avoided.

Capital Letters

Capital Letters are used for:

- Beginning sentences
- Following a full stop, exclamation or question mark
- They are **not** used following commas, full or semi-colons

- Beginning direct speech (not usually part of academic writing)

- First person (I, as in 'I will argue that...')

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- Days, months and religious/political days (Wednesday, 31st May, Diwali, May Day)
- Languages (Urdu, Italian, Yoruba)
- Places: towns, counties, cities, countries (Ormskirk, Yorkshire, Bath, Scotland)
- Titles, specific roles, organisations or institutions (Managing Director, Government, Parliament)
- If you are writing in general, when the title does not refer to a specific person, organisation or institution, capital letters are not needed.

Example: Plato's Socrates discusses different forms of **government** in the dialogues.

- Names (also called proper nouns) and titles (Arctic Monkeys, Berlin Wall, Tudor, First World War)

Note: the short linking words in titles do not need capitals (*Game of Thrones*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*).

Commas

Commas have many uses; here we concentrate on those that are most common in academic writing. It is commas that most often cause problems!

Overall, commas are used to break up parts of a sentence and make it easier to read.

Comma usage is often a matter of judgement. If you find yourself lost in a sentence with lots of commas in it, it is probably too long; if you are caught up in multiple clauses, you may need to add a comma or two.

Underuse of commas can make a sentence hard to follow, especially if it is long. For example:

Indeed more high-quality evidence needs to be produced to formulate an adequate plan of care under such circumstances as for example a pandemic or when there is a sustained amount of pressure on services over a long period.

Occasionally, overuse of commas can also be a problem and interrupt the flow of a sentence:

Indeed, more, high-quality, evidence needs to be produced, to formulate an adequate plan of care, under such circumstances, as, for example, a pandemic, or when there is a sustained amount of pressure on services, over a long period.

Although not the only solution, removing some commas here would help, for example:

Indeed, more high-quality evidence needs to be produced to formulate an adequate plan of care under such circumstances, as for example, a pandemic, or when there is a sustained amount of pressure on services over a long period.

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Some other common uses and issues are outlined below, with examples.

Separating items in a series (list)

A comma is used to separate three or more items in a series of words, phrases or clauses.

Example: I am studying **English, History and Film Studies**.

Example: The role of the teacher includes **planning the lessons, classroom management, assessing progress and working with other teams**.

Note: You do not usually need a comma before the final 'and' in a list unless there is a possibility of confusing the reader.

Example:

I compared the annual sales figures from Boots, Holland and Barrett and Lloyds.

Here we can't be sure if 'Holland' is a store and 'Barrett and Lloyds' is another store. A comma makes the situation clear.

Example: I compared the annual sales figures from Boots, Holland and Barrett, and Lloyds.

The fact is, however, that placing a comma before the final 'and' in a list (or not) is a stylistic choice (you may have heard it referred to as the 'serial' or 'Oxford comma') and not a strict grammatical rule, so don't worry about it too much. As ever, what matters most is that your meaning reaches the reader.

Commas with co-ordinating conjunctions

Co-ordinating conjunctions are linking words, such as **but, or, yet, for, and, nor**.

If you use a **co-ordinating conjunction** in short sentences, you **do not** need a comma.

Example: Oscar Wilde wrote short stories **and** plays.

Example: The theory is long-standing **but** poorly supported by evidence.

Sometimes however, longer sentences with co-ordinating conjunctions may need a comma to break up the sentence. It is not 'wrong' to place one before the conjunction if needed (even though you may have been told it is at some point!).

Example: A combination of direct action, communication with political representatives and formal routes of complaint were employed, **yet** the participants have still not received a written response.

Avoiding the 'comma splice' (missing links between sentences and clauses):

More importantly, remember that a comma cannot link two sentences or clauses on its own – you will need to use a linking word (conjunction) or linking punctuation, such as a colon or semi-colon.

This incorrect use of commas, neglecting to link parts of a sentence, is a very common mistake in essays, so do check for it when proofreading. You may see this common error referred to as the '**comma splice**' (have a look online!).

Read aloud and think about the phrasing and flow to catch such issues. When editing, you may even decide it is clearer to leave the sentences separate.

Examples:

Incorrect: The study was comprehensive, a high percentage of participants were retained for the whole duration of the study.

Correct: The study was comprehensive **as** a high percentage of participants were retained for the whole duration of the study.

Incorrect: For example, academic writing can be challenging, some students may have no prior experience.

Correct: For example, academic writing can be challenging **because** some students may have no prior experience.

Correct: For example, academic writing can be challenging; some students may have no prior experience.

Correct: For example, academic writing can be challenging. This is often due to the fact that some students may have no prior experience.

For adding additional non-essential information to a sentence (parenthetical commas)

Examples:

1a. Researchers should employ a range of, ideally digitised, methods as part of their archiving strategy.

1b. Several diverse interpretations of her novel, including psychoanalytic and especially Jungian readings, have now become mainstream.

Here a **pair of commas** are used to insert an expression that is **not essential to the main point of the sentence but providing additional information or comment**. This information is enclosed in a **pair of commas**.

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These are sometimes referred to as parenthetical commas as they enclose a *parenthesis* – that is, a comment, an aside, an explanation - really just any sort of additional information. [Dashes](#) and [brackets](#) (the latter of which are also referred to, somewhat confusingly, as *parentheses*) also perform this function.

We could take out the information enclosed in the parenthetical commas and the sentence would still be complete with a clear overall meaning.

Examples:

2a. Researchers should employ a range of methods as part of their archiving strategy.

2b. Several interpretations of her novel have now become mainstream.

These are sometimes termed '**commenting clauses**', in contrast with '**defining clauses**'. Have a look at the [example](#) below and how the choice of comma use changes the emphasis of the sentence:

The students, who are new to the course, are very committed. (Commenting clause, where the information the students are new reads as incidental, extra information.)

The students who are new to the course are very committed. (Defining clause, where the information the students are new reads as an essential part of the sentence's meaning.)

More Commas and Clauses

Commas to separate clauses

A comma is needed to separate two clauses when the first clause is not closely related to the second clause. Remember, a [clause](#) is a group of words where one thing is happening.

Example: New students should begin with the reading list, whilst continuing students need to begin an independent literature search.

Commas and signposting words or phrases

A comma is normally used after a signposting word or phrase, such as however, indeed, nevertheless, in fact, no doubt, incidentally, for example, on the contrary, of course etc.

Example:

In fact, none of the results are conclusive.

It is true, however, that the experiments were performed consistently over a period of three months.

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Subjects, verbs and commas

When constructing a sentence, do not separate a subject from its verb with a comma as it may make the sentence's main point unclear.

Examples:

This section discusses the interpretation of the project's data.

This section, discusses the interpretation of the project's data.

Full stops

Full stops are used to:

End sentences

When proofreading, it is worth checking your referencing or style guide to make sure you know how citations relate to punctuation in that particular formatting style.

They are also important in reference formatting; the [UniSkills Referencing pages](#) have more help.

Abbreviate (general)

In general, abbreviations are too informal for academic assignments (though can be included if part of a quotation, or if there are particular subject specific conventions). If in doubt, write in full. See above for more information on [e.g.](#), [i.e.](#), and [et al.](#)

Abbreviate (personal titles)

Abbreviations that use the first and last letter of a name do not need a full stop. For example, Mr (Mister), or Dr (Doctor).

Abbreviate (names of organisations)

Abbreviations for the names of organisations do not need full stops, for example: BBC, ITV, DfES. Write out the full name of the organisation when you first mention it, then abbreviate it afterwards.

Example:

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) provides guidelines for practising nurses. The NMC (2002) state that nurses have a duty of care to patients.

Indicate ellipsis ...

Ellipsis is the use of three dots to show an incomplete quote. This is a good way to shorten quotes so that you only use the relevant information for your essay.

Example: 'Writing cannot be separated from other processes such as reflection, goal-setting, organisation and research ... [and] in practice you will find that they are interrelated' (Cottrell, 2010: 167).

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Note: When you use ellipsis ... the sentence should still make sense. If you need to add words to complete the sense of the sentence, these should appear in square brackets, as in the example above.

Punctuating numerical information

Example: Full stops for currency and percentages, £10.99, 2.5%, but colons for time 10:00, 21:00

Colons

We see full colons all over the place, for example, introducing direct speech in news reports, or separating titles and subtitles of books and films (for example, *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, *Law and Public Choice: A Critical Introduction*, or *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text*).

In academic writing, their main function is to introduce a list, or sometimes, further information in a list-like form.

Example:

The use of media in the later works is eclectic: paint, video, live performance, and sculpture.

Full colons may also be used to introduce a reason, or to lend the effect of an announcement.

Example:

There are two reasons why the experiment failed: badly reasoned methodology and researcher bias.

Semi-colons

Linking related statements

Semi-colons are a way to join separate statements where they could otherwise remain separate sentences, but the writer wishes to communicate that the subject-matter in the statements is linked somehow.

Example:

Healthcare professionals must develop a range of interpersonal skills. Effective communication and advocacy are considered essential in most roles.

These two sentences could become:

Healthcare professionals must develop a range of interpersonal skills; effective communication and advocacy are considered essential in most roles.

The main thing to remember is that to use a semi-colon, both statements must be able to otherwise stand as sentences their own right.

Incorrect example:

Despite the lack of evidence; several scholars have argued increasing monitoring improves outcomes.

The first part of the statement before the semi-colon cannot stand alone, therefore a comma would do the job here of separating the parts of the sentence, in a way that makes reading easier.

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Separating items in a list

Semi-colons are useful for separating items in a list, especially if the list is long and/or includes several complex items which may have their own punctuation.

Example:

The play explores a number of themes: state-individual relations; marital, parental and sibling relations; protest and rebellion; and how war can transform personal and political views.

Note the use of a full colon to introduce the list!

Hyphens

Hyphens have many uses, but in academic writing they most often occur linking words together to make new compound words.

Examples:

Participants were asked to complete a self-assessment form. (Compound adjective)

The physician associate completed the check-up. (Compound noun)

In general, lots of hyphenation is to be avoided. Running words together like 'playgroup' for example, is now much more common than writing 'play-group'. The main place this is still seen is when the writer wants to avoid the same letter meeting, for example, writing 'self-financing' instead of the odd-looking 'selffinancing'. Use your judgement as to what looks right and if in doubt check a dictionary.

Sometimes hyphens can also help to remove confusion over the meaning of a sentence. For example: In cinema, the man-eating shark has been much mythologised. (Think *Jaws* or *The Meg*)

In cinema, the man eating shark has been much mythologised. (How many films have you watched about a man eating a large fish-supper?)

Dashes

Dashes can take the place of brackets or commas to **insert additional information** in sentences. They can be used sparingly in academic writing.

Example:

This group of plants are known to be hardy – they require minimal care – hence their adaptation to agriculture in arid climates.

Dashes can also be used to add an afterthought:

Example:

The methodology can be considered robust in design – if it can be shown to apply in diverse conditions.

Round brackets ()

Round brackets (or parentheses) are used to include relevant (but not essential) information.

Example:

James Clarence Mangan (1849-1903) was an Irish poet.

Square brackets []

Integrating quotation

Square brackets can be used when you include quotation in your work and further words must be added to the quotation to make the meaning clear, or ensure it fits grammatically into the flow of your sentence.

Example: The first cohort [year one associate physicians] agreed with the decision.

Example: It is important to get students in the 'right mood to think [by] gaining their attention' (Cowley, 2004: 8).

Indicating a spelling error in a quoted source text

If there is an error or an unconventional spelling in a direct quote you are using, write [sic] after it. Sic is Latin for 'thus' and is a way of showing that the error is not yours.

Example: 'The children did not receive [sic] any rewards for this' (Green, 2002: 19). (This indicates here that receive is misspelt.)

Braces { } < >

Brace brackets **{these}** or angle brackets **<these>** should only be used in specialist texts (maths, tabulations etc.).

Exclamation mark!

These are not generally used in formal writing.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Want to know more? There are plenty of great resources available through the university library, including works tailored to discipline, and level of experience.

Here are some of our suggestions for useful places to look up any questions or discover more in-depth explanations:

Print Books:

BURT, A., 2004. *Quick Solutions to Common Errors in English*. 3rd ed. Oxford: How to Books Ltd.

CUTTS, M. 2013. *Oxford Guide to Plain English*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

FIELD, M., 2001. *Improving your Written English*. 3rd ed. Oxford: How to Books Ltd.

KING, G., 2004. *Good Punctuation: the one-stop punctuation solver*. Glasgow: Harper Collins

OSMOND, A., 2016. *Academic Writing and Grammar for Students*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing.

ROSE, J. 2012. *The Mature Student's Guide to Writing*. 3rd ed. Houndmills: Palgrave.

eBooks and online resources:

AARTS, B., 2014. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* [eBook]. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available from: <https://www-oxfordreferencecom.edgehill.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780199658237.001.0001/acref-9780199658237>.

BAILEY, S. 2003. Part 3: Accuracy in Writing. In: *Academic Writing: A Practical Guide for Students* [eBook]. London: Routledge. Available from: http://edgehill.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=102484&site=ehost-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_vi

BEHRENS, S.J., 2010. *Grammar: A Pocket Guide* [eBook]. Florence: Taylor and Francis Group. Available from: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/edgehill/detail.action?docID=589597>

BUTTERFIELD, J. ed., 2015. *Fowler's Concise Dictionary of Modern English Usage* [eBook]. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available from <https://www-oxfordreferencecom.edgehill.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780199666317.001.0001/acref-9780199666317-e3569>.

GARNER, B., 2016. *Garner's Modern English Usage* [eBook]. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available from: <https://www-oxfordreferencecom.edgehill.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780190491482.001.0001/acref-9780190491482>.

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HAUSER, M., 2011. *Good Word Guide* [eBook]. 7th ed. London: Bloomsbury. Available from: <https://edgehill.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/title/acbgwg?institutionId=101&tab=entries>

PECK, J. AND COYLE, C. 2012. *The student's guide to writing: spelling, punctuation and grammar* [eBook]. 3rd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Available from: <https://edgehill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/855697737>

Linked-In Learning (available free to Edge Hill students) also has free online courses in *Grammar Foundations*, *Advanced Grammar*, *Writing with Proper Punctuation*, and *Writing with Commonly Confused Words*. Access these courses (and more) via the webpages at <https://www.edgehill.ac.uk/departments/support/ls/linkedinlearning/>

As with many aspects of academic writing, you will absorb most of the information in this guide through academic reading and becoming more familiar with the conventions in your chosen subject area.

Next time you are reading an academic journal, try looking up the style guide for authors – they are usually full of useful examples and advice.

GLOSSARY OF COMMON TERMS

Grammar is a complex world and can be intimidating as there are many technical terms. You may be familiar with some of them already, and there is certainly no need to learn them all. In this section, we try to demystify some of this language which may make responding to feedback in this area easier.

We have included some definitions of these terms here (partly based on Cutts, 2013) to help you make sense of the use of grammatical terms in any advice, explanations and feedback.

ADJECTIVE:

A describing word ('**comprehensive** review'; '**professional** conduct'; '**large** textbook') that accompanies a noun.

ADVERB:

A word (usually ending -ly) that further describes a verb. For example:

The anaesthetist **quickly** assesses the situation.

The review was conducted **effectively**.

They can also be used to convey a view of how something is happening in a sentence. For example:

The results were **unexpectedly** inconsistent.

CONJUNCTION:

A linking word (e.g., **and**, **but**, **if**).

NOUN:

A noun can be 'a person, thing, place, activity or quality' (Cutts, 2014: 145; e.g., **boy**, **stone**, **meadow**, **painting**, **happiness**). A proper noun refers to specific names of things (e.g., **Adam**, **Manchester**, **Poland**).

OBJECT:

The thing in a sentence which is having the action of the verb done to it.

The tutor marked **the papers** (object).

PRONOUN:

E.g., **she**, **they**, **it**, **someone** (function in place of a noun).

‘SIGNPOSTING’ (DISCOURSE MARKERS):

Phrases used to direct and orient the reader within the structure of a piece of writing and in your thought process, for example:

‘In this assignment....’ ‘This paper argues....’

‘By linking this point to the discussion in section 6, we see that....’

‘A possible objection to this argument could be the lack of available evidence, however, it can be shown that....’

SUBJECT:

The thing (noun/pronoun) carrying out the action of the verb.

The **administrator** (subject) oversees the process.

You may see reference to the verb agreeing with its noun; this means that the form of the verb used matches up with the form of the subject and tells the reader what is going on. For example, the verb form may change slightly depending on whether the grammatical subject is singular or plural:

The island’s **tree is** ancient.

The island’s **trees are** ancient.

SYNTAX:

Syntax is the term for the way the different grammatical elements of a sentence are placed together. When someone refers to syntax, they are usually referring therefore to sentence structure in terms of grammar and phrasing or ‘flow’, that is, whether the sentence makes sense and reads well.

In relation to understanding effective syntax, which helps the reader grasp your ideas more easily, it is helpful to understand what phrase, clause and sentence mean (in a grammatical context):

Sentences

A sentence is the order of words used to communicate a complete idea or thought to the reader. Cutts (2014: 146) defines the sentence as ‘complete in itself as the expression of a thought’ - hence getting your sentences to work effectively is very important in academic writing!

A sentence begins with a capital letter and ends in a full stop. In academic writing, sentences tend to be **declarative** (i.e., statements), stating facts and theories, and contain a subject and additional relevant information.

Example: Students are expected to submit their assignments on time.

Phrases

A **phrase** is a group of words that work together but do not make sense on their own in the way that a complete sentence does.

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Examples:

Abundant examples of international evidence (phrase).

The study provides abundant examples of international evidence (sentence).

Clauses

A **clause** is a group of words where one thing is happening. When linked together, clauses make up longer and more complex sentences.

Example:

The research laboratory is very busy because dissertations are due in this month.

- The research laboratory is very busy (clause)
- because (linking conjunction)
- dissertations are due in this month. (clause)

TENSE:

When something has taken place (Smith argues/has argued).

VERB:

Commonly described as 'doing words', verbs convey some sort of action taking place. As their form changes with tense, they also convey the time at which that action happens/happened/is happening.... etc.