

BASIC WRITING TIPS

The following provides a basic overview of common issues faced by students when writing an academic assignment or thesis. If you know them in advance, you should find writing in English much easier.

Please note that only basic definitions are provided here for grammatical terms. If you're unsure about any of the terms used, double check in a grammar textbook or online.

■ Different parts of speech

► Pronouns

Pronouns are used *instead of repeating nouns*, for example, "he", "she", "it", "them", etc. Points to remember concerning these are:

- **Do they agree in number?** *Singular* pronouns are used instead of *singular* nouns (e.g., "he states" instead of "Einstein states"), and *plural* pronouns instead of *plural* nouns (e.g., "they discovered" instead of "Watson and Crick discovered").
- It's advisable to use the **third person**, i.e., "he", "she", "him", "her", "they", "them", instead of the first, i.e., "I", "me", "you". But, whichever you decide to use, be consistent.
- When you use a pronoun, make sure that the reader knows **which noun it's replacing**. In other words, if you start to refer to a concept as "it", be sure that your reader is clear what "it" stands for.

► Prepositions

Prepositions are used in sentences to *connect* nouns or pronouns to other words. In general, they show a connection with time or space, for instance, "in", "on", "at", etc.

- Be careful **not to use prepositions superfluously**. This will make your writing wordy and long-winded. Generally, you shouldn't need more than one at a time.
- There are **certain words that are always followed by a particular preposition**, for instance, "acquainted with" or "objection to". Make sure you know which these are (otherwise, you should check a grammar textbook or online for guidance).

► Nouns and verbs

Nouns are *naming* words, for example, "farmer", "business", "land". Verbs are *doing* words, for instance, "to own", "to harvest", "to calculate". Make sure that your nouns and verbs agree in terms of *singular* nouns with *singular* verbs (e.g., "Directly addressing the needs of smallholder farmers *is* essential" not "Directly addressing the needs of smallholder farmers *are* essential"), and *plural* nouns with *plural* verbs (e.g., "With secure rights to land, smallholder farmers *are* more likely to qualify for credit" not "With secure rights to land,

smallholder farmers *is* more likely to qualify for credit”).

■ Sentence structure

A good sentence should consist of a **noun** and a **verb**, and needs to be complete in itself in regard to meaning. If you don't convey a fully developed thought, this is known as a **sentence fragment**: they tend to be missing a verb or a subject. For example:

Agroecology is regarded as an alternative smallholder farming system to the industrialized system. Because farmers can produce more food with fewer resources.

This can be easily remedied by joining the second sentence (the fragment) with the first sentence:

Agroecology is regarded as an alternative smallholder farming system to the industrialized system because farmers can produce more food with fewer resources.

Run-on sentences, on the other hand, are the opposite: they're too long, consisting of more than one sentence and bad punctuation. For example:

Phytomedicine is the study of plant illness and damage it is concerned with methods that support plant health.

This, again, can be easily fixed by splitting the sentence into two. Either by using a period:

Phytomedicine is the study of plant illness and damage. It is concerned with methods that support plant health.

Or by using a semi-colon:

Phytomedicine is the study of plant illness and damage; it is concerned with methods that support plant health.

■ Paragraphs

One way to think of paragraphs is as clusters of sentences with a common focus. Paragraphs are dealt with in detail in “**How to write paragraphs**” in this series.

■ Tense shifts

In general, try not to switch from one tense to another while writing about a particular situation or topic: it can be confusing for the reader and appear awkward. (Of course, this is not *always* the case). For more guidance on this issues, have a look at “**How to use tenses**” in this series.

■ Double negatives

Make sure to avoid **double negatives**. This is where you use two forms of negation in the same sentence. They sound awkward and can obscure your meaning. They can even cancel out what you were trying to say in the first place.

One way to avoid them is to refrain from using “not” with negative words such as:

- neither
- never
- no-one
- nobody
- nothing
- no
- none

For instance, instead of putting “There are *not no*...”, you should write “There are *not any*...”.

■ Punctuation

Good punctuation makes your writing sound more refined and gives it more clarity. The English language uses a plethora of different types. The ones listed here are those that seem to give many people the most problems.

► Apostrophes (')

The apostrophe signals **ownership**. There are six different ways that it can be used:

- **singular possessive**, e.g., the *farmer's* field; *Mr. Briggs'* cattle
- **plurals that don't end in 's'**, e.g., *women's* rights; *children's* nutrition
- **possessive plural nouns that end in 's'**, e.g., *stakeholders'* money
- **indefinite pronouns**, e.g., climate change is *everybody's* responsibility
- **plurals of numbers, letters and figures**, as well as some money and time expressions, e.g., the program was the result of a *year's* worth of research; one farmer chose all *three's* in the survey
- **using the last word to relay possession** with organizations or joint ventures, e.g., the Food and Agriculture *Organization's* report; Professor Bird and *Dr. Finch's* project

When writing, **don't use contractions** (as used here), e.g., use “it is” not “it's”, or use “she is” not “she's”. This issue is also dealt with in “**Academic writing style tips**” in this series.

► Commas (,)

In English, the use of commas is more common than some people realize. A rule of thumb for commas is to regard them as breaths: say the sentence in your mind and think about when you would naturally breathe or take a short pause. Commas can really change the meaning of a sentence. For instance, “Let's eat mother” has a very different meaning to “Let's eat, mother”! So, it's worth bearing them in mind.

Be careful not to use a comma instead of writing two sentences. This is known as a **comma splice**. For example:

Plants create a large proportion of the oxygen and food depended upon by humans, they are the foundation of nearly all the world's animal life.

Instead, use a period, a semi-colon or a conjunction, e.g., “and” or “because”.

So, using the example above:

Plants create a large proportion of the oxygen and food depended upon by humans. They are the foundation of nearly all the world's animal life.

Some people use serial commas when writing lists. This is where a comma is added after the last element of a list, e.g., “she grows carrots, cauliflowers, and cabbages”, as opposed to “she grows carrots, cauliflowers and cabbages”. In this sentence, *without* the last comma you would still understand the sentence, so using them in this instance is very much a personal choice.

► Colons (:)

Colons can be used for a number of reasons:

- **To start off a list**, but it must follow a complete sentence, e.g., “BRICS stands for four different countries: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa” and not “The BRICS acronym consists of: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa”.
- **To elaborate on what was said before**, e.g., “The global economy presents an unfair system: it favors richer countries and corporations”. Using a colon in such a way instills a more authoritative tone than using a period, for instance.

► Semi-colons (;)

The semi-colon is one of the most misunderstood punctuation marks. The great thing is, you can get away with not using it at all if you're unsure of how to. However, the following will provide you with two basic situations in which you can:

- **To separate independent clauses instead of using a conjunction**, e.g., “The project was composed of 25 people; eight of them were women” instead of “The project was composed of 25 people and eight of them were women”.
- **To separate elements in a series instead of using commas**. If you're listing explanations as opposed to just words, using semi-colons can make this clearer for the reader, e.g., “There are three main attributes of the present global structure which contribute to world hunger: firstly, inequity, which is inherent in the system; secondly, the increasingly encroaching power of non-state actors over the state; and thirdly, that the influences of the system are usually the diffuse outcome of different actors”.

Remember that whatever comes before and after a semi-colon must be a standalone sentence in itself.

■ Capitalization

In English, there are only a few situations in which you need to use capitalization:

- the first word in a sentence
- proper nouns, i.e., the names of people or places

- the names of organizations and institutions
- the first word of a complete quotation
- titles, e.g., books, journals
- the pronoun “I” and any of its contractions, e.g., “I’ll”, “I’d”

In German, nouns in general are capitalized. Refrain from doing this! If the situation is none of the above, the chances are that you don’t need to capitalize.

■ Hyphens (-) and dashes (–)

The hyphen is the smaller of the two, and used for compound words, e.g., “semi-colon”, and between numbers when indicating moving from one to another, e.g., “25-26 chickens were kept in each coop”.

The dash is longer. If you have keyboard with a numeric keypad, you can create an **em-dash** by holding down the alt key and typing in 0151. Two of the main circumstances in which using the em-dash is effective are:

- **instead of brackets** to give what you’re saying more emphasis, e.g., “NGOs and CSOs do not have – or, at least, should not have – state or corporate allegiances”.
- **instead of a colon**, again, to add more emphasis to what you’re saying, e.g., “Democracy is extensively considered to be the only acceptable form of governance – it could even be said almost universally”.

■ Abbreviations and acronyms

An **acronym** is where only the first letters of a name or sentence are given, e.g., UN instead of United Nations. Always spell out acronyms initially, providing the shortened form in brackets, and then *only* use the acronym from then on throughout your writing. However, there are a few exceptions whereby the acronym is essentially more well-known than the spelt out version and so can be used as such from the beginning, e.g., AIDS, USA, NATO.

An **abbreviation** is where you shorten or contract a term or name, e.g., Dr. instead of Doctor. If you decide to abbreviate a title or name in your writing because, for instance, it’s too long to keep repeating in full, e.g., you decide to use “The Norms” instead of the “Norms on the Responsibilities of Transnational Corporations and Other Business Enterprises with Regard to Human Rights”, you need to make this clear to your readers. This can be achieved as follows:

The Norms on the Responsibilities of Transnational Corporations and Other Business Enterprises with Regard to Human Rights (hereafter known as the Norms) was approved by the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights on 13 August, 2003.

Don’t overuse abbreviations and acronyms: it can make your writing confusing. If you only use the name or title once, or even twice, there’s no real need to provide an abbreviation or acronym for it.

■ Underlining and italics

Underlining and *italics* have the same function: to emphasize a word or phrase. However, italics is much more common with word processed documents (underlining is more common for handwritten pieces). Nevertheless, whichever you decide on, make sure you're consistent. And don't use CAPITALIZATION to emphasize.

■ Footnotes and endnotes

Footnotes come at the bottom (foot) of a page, whereas **endnotes** can be found at the end of an article, book chapter or book. Both can be used for two main reasons:

- ▶ for **references**, instead of providing a citation in the text followed by a reference section
- ▶ to provide your reader with **additional information** that doesn't have to be included in the main text

More guidance on foot- and endnotes can be found in "**How to use footnotes and endnotes**" in this series.