

## CHAPTER 10

# Writing: from the basics towards excellence

We've got down the basics now; how to outline different types of essays, how to synthesize texts to create complex critical writing and how to keep ourselves in our narrative by using attributive verbs and hedging. Our writing is starting to look pretty exciting, and your grades are going up. Is there any more we can do? Of course, there is, there is always more we can do. This chapter will look at some of the skills you need to continue advancing your writing towards excellence. We will look at some of the mechanics of writing such as grammar; better transitions; clarity and presenting your work. It might seem strange when talking about excellence in your writing to look back to grammar and syntax, these are in some ways the most basic parts of language and writing, but it's getting these right, and using them in a clever way, that will really make your work shine. Before we start on these though, let's remind ourselves of some general writing tips, because everything we have learned so far, and the stuff that is coming, can only work to its fullest if we have a few other more basic, or personal, things in place too.

*Write where you are comfortable and write with your 'comfort food'*

This might sound like an obvious piece of advice, but many students forget that thinking needs food, and more importantly it needs water. But also, your brain needs to be happy, and having the right foods and the right surroundings can make a real difference to your productivity – Don't spend so long getting these things right that it becomes procrastination, but listen to your body, give it the snacks it craves, and make sure you are well hydrated – you can always work off the excess chips after you graduate.

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***Before you worry about editing, just write!!***

As we have already seen, everyone is a little different in the way in which they approach their writing, but as Edgar Allan Poe told us in chapter 4 the more we try and remember something, the quicker we are to forget it, so get outlines down fast, jot down ideas as they come, be they one word or whole paragraphs, and then come back later to make them perfect (you need to leave time for this of course). I have lost track of the number of ideas that have been lost to not remembering something that I wish I had written down.

***Read grammar books***

This chapter is going to give some general advice on some of the most common grammar issues you may face, but also taking some time to head back to grammar books, regardless of your English level, is a really quick and easy way to improve your writing. If you don't have a book yet, try Caplan's (2012) *Grammar Choices*, or Murphy and Smalzer's (2017) *Basic Grammar in Use*. Also, while you're reading academic texts you will find lots of unusual and complex grammar. Examine this, and try to emulate (not copy) it in your own writing. If it all seems too complex, then use grammar books to help you understand how this works and then you can use it in your own writings too, like a pro!

***'Papers are never finished, but always due'*** as Kelly Gallagher, author of numerous books on writing, reminds us. This means that a cautious level of dropping perfectionism is required. You will be managing multiple essays and papers throughout your degree, and so it's important to balance these completing priorities. You need to be careful in managing your time, managing what is possible, and considering the relative weighting given to different papers. For example, missing a dissertation class because you are putting the final touches to a paper worth 10% of one module is probably a poor use of your time. So, plan carefully – Have you still not read chapter 2? Come on, go and do it now!



STUDENT  
TIPS

Work out what your average number of words written per day or hour is for assignments. This helps with time management.

Craig – MA Student

***Practice makes perfect***

A tired cliché? Maybe! But there is more than a slice of truth to this statement, and its important you realize that everyone is still practicing, we are all

still shaping our writing, still developing our styles, still trying out new things. And you should be too. Try writing something every day, even if it doesn't make the final cut, that way you are constantly practicing and moving towards being perfect! It can though be hard to know if you are improving. Grades can give us some indication, but aren't always the best way for us to measure our own improvement. Instead we need to engage with critically reflecting on our own experiences using the skills we learned in chapter 6. Take some time out to look back over your work, what went well? Where were the issues? Have you made a conscious effort to work on those areas that you find more challenging? You could also get a friend to help with this – they need to be a good friend though, one who can be honest with you about your achievements, but not someone who is going to be nasty (they wouldn't be your friend anyway would they?). You could also speak with your personal tutor at the university, or another member of staff, about your progress – Of course their ideas might be more based on grades than your personal growth, so also take time to reflect on what they have said. Reflection is a really important part of practice makes perfect, so pop back to chapter 6 now and take some time out before coming back to grammar.

Okay. We have some general tips out of the way, let us get down to the nitty gritty of how to make your work shine through improving our grammar.

## Grammar

As you know, this is not a grammar book, and I have already recommended that you go back to your grammar books to make sure you get these things right, but there are some specific issues that come up time and again in student writing, and they are the mistakes that make a difference between a basic piece of work and one that shows excellence – and we want excellence now. So, given that this chapter is called basics to excellence, it seems appropriate that I should share some grammar tips with you here. It might be tempting to skip this bit, none of us like grammar, but here is where your work can really shine. Even if you think you know English well, there are bound to be some things to help, so at the very least, practice your reading skills by not skipping this bit.



Caution

**Note:** Be careful, while I have tried to make these pages as useful as possible, they are a dangerously short guide to some very complex parts of English. The tips here will help with your essays, but for more detailed information, or if you are unsure, try a proper grammar book, something like Swan's (2005) *Practical English Usage*.

## Prepositions: time and place

Prepositions, tiny little words that make a huge difference. In simple terms prepositions are used to show the relationship between other words, the problem is, they are hard to define on their own, and don't really mean very much at all out of context. The bigger problem is, your writing is all about showing relationships between words and ideas, so getting the prepositions right is a really important part of academic writing.

We mostly use prepositions along with other words, in what we call **prepositional phrases** (starting to sound like a grammar book – keep with me here). There are millions of combinations of these words, but they normally follow the pattern of being a preposition followed by a *determiner* and an *adjective* or two, and then finished off nicely with a *noun* or *pronoun* (that is what we call the *object* of the sentence). When this is all put together it helps us to position objects, or ideas, in time and space, to give them a geographical or historical location. The easiest thing to do here is to look at some examples of the rules in action:

### Prepositions of time: *at*, *on*, and *in*

We use <i>at</i> to designate specific times.	We use <i>on</i> to designate days and dates.	We use <i>in</i> for nonspecific times during a day, a month, a season, or a year.
<i>The train is due <b>at</b> 14:15 p.m</i>	<i>My brother is coming <b>on</b> Monday.</i> <i>We're having a party <b>on</b> the 5<sup>th</sup> February.</i>	<i>He likes to jog <b>in</b> the morning.</i> <i>It's too hot <b>in</b> summer to run outside.</i> <i>She started the job <b>in</b> 1998.</i> <i>He's going to quit <b>in</b> September.</i>

### Prepositions of place: *at*, *on*, and *in*

We use <i>at</i> for specific addresses.	We use <i>on</i> to designate names of streets, avenues, etc.	And we use <i>in</i> for the names of land-areas (towns, counties, states, countries, and continents).
<i>Sarah lives <b>at</b> 67 New Street, London</i>	<i>Her house is <b>on</b> New Street</i>	<i>She lives <b>in</b> London.</i> <i>London is <b>in</b> England</i> <i>England is <b>in</b> the United Kingdom</i>

### Prepositions of movement: *to* and *no preposition*

We use *to* in order to express movement toward a place.

*They were walking **to** work together.*

*She's going **to** the doctors this morning*

*Toward* and *towards* are also helpful prepositions to express movement.

*We're moving **toward** the end of the class.*

*This is a big step **towards** finishing your dissertation.*

With the words *home*, *downtown*, *uptown*, *inside*, *outside*, *downstairs*, *upstairs*, we use no preposition

*My sister went upstairs*

*He went home.*

*They both went outside.*

### Prepositions of time: *for* and *since*

We use *for* when we measure time (seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years).

*He held his breath **for** eight minutes.*

*She's lived there **for** fifteen years.*

*The internet has existed **for** three decades*

We use *since* with a specific date or time.

*He's lived here **since** 1995.*

*She's been waiting for her friend **since** six-thirty.*

### Prepositions with nouns, adjectives, and verbs

Sometimes prepositions get really stuck to the words around them, like an annoying friend who doesn't know when to go home. In these cases, we have just given up, and let them basically become one word – If this was German, they would actually be one word, but this is English, so they are still two words, but they just have to be used together. This can happen with nouns, adjectives and with verbs, and like above, its easiest to show you how that happens – remember you don't need to learn this off the top of your head, use these pages while you are writing, and the rules will begin to stick:

NOUNS and PREPOSITIONS							
approve	of	fondness	for	need	for	concern	for
awareness	of	grasp	of	participation	in	confusion	about
belief	in	hatred	of	reason	for	desire	for
understanding	of	hope	for	respect	for		
		interest	in	success	in		

ADJECTIVES and PREPOSITIONS							
afraid	of	fond	of	proud	of	tired	of
angry	at	happy	about	similar	to	worried	about
aware	of	interested	in	sorry	for	made	of
capable	of	jealous	of	sure	of	married	to
careless	about	familiar	with				

VERBS and PREPOSITIONS							
apologize	for	give	up	prepare	for	work	for
ask	about	grow	up	study	for	worry	about
ask	for	look	for	talk	about	make	up
belong	to	look forward	to	think	about	pay	for
bring	up	look	up	trust	in	care	for
find	out						

### Linkers and transitional words

All the ideas and writing methods we have discussed so far are great (if I do say so myself), but they are useless if you can't link ideas together well, leaving your writing looking overly simple. This is why it is essential to understand how *linking and transitional words* can be used to combine ideas in writing, as these words will make your writing flow and help you to express complex relationships between ideas. Many of these are small words, but just like our attributive verbs, they have many meanings and can change the whole tone of your writing very quickly – so it is important to take some time to check that you are using them correctly. Luckily for you I have included a whole load of them here for you. Remember to ensure you know what they *really* mean, by using a dictionary. Using different linking words can really change the way your essay reads, and can help you to show complex connections between ideas – you can quickly show agreement or disagreement between things you have read. Make sure you choose the right words though, because otherwise you will confuse the reader. Remember if you are unsure, use a dictionary to check the meaning of words before you use them.

Agreement/Addition/Similarity	The transition words like <i>also</i> , <i>in addition</i> , <i>and</i> , <i>likewise</i> , <b>add information</b> , <b>reinforce ideas</b> , and <b>express agreement</b> with preceding material.		
	in the first place not only ... but also as a matter of fact in like manner in addition coupled with in the same fashion/way first, second, third in the light of not to mention to say nothing of equally important by the same token	again to and also then equally identically uniquely like as too	moreover as well as together with of course likewise comparatively correspondingly similarly furthermore additionally
Opposition/Limitation/Contradiction	Transition phrases like <i>but</i> , <i>rather</i> and <i>or</i> , express that there is evidence to the <b>contrary</b> or point out <b>alternatives</b> , and thus introduce a change the line of reasoning ( <b>contrast</b> ).		
	although this may be true in contrast different from of course ..., but on the other hand on the contrary at the same time in spite of even so/though be that as it may then again above all in reality after all	but (and) still unlike or (and) yet while albeit besides as much as even though	although instead whereas despite conversely otherwise however rather nevertheless nonetheless regardless notwithstanding

Cause/Condition/Purpose	These transitional phrases present specific <b>conditions</b> or <b>intentions</b> .		
	in the event that granted (that) as/so long as on (the) condition (that) for the purpose of with this intention with this in mind in the hope that to the end that for fear that in order to seeing/being that in view of	If ... then unless when whenever while because of as since while lest	in case provided that given that only/even if so that so as to owing to inasmuch as due to
Examples/Support/Emphasis	These transitional devices (like <i>especially</i> ) are used to introduce examples as <b>support</b> , to indicate <b>importance</b> or as an <b>illustration</b> so that an idea is cued to the reader.		
	in other words to put it differently for one thing as an illustration in this case for this reason to put it another way that is to say with attention to by all means important to realize another key point first thing to remember most compelling evidence must be remembered point often overlooked to point out on the positive side on the negative side with this in mind	notably including like to be sure namely chiefly truly indeed certainly surely markedly such as especially explicitly specifically expressly surprisingly frequently significantly particularly	in fact in general in particular in detail for example for instance to demonstrate to emphasize to repeat to clarify to explain to enumerate



Effect/Consequence/Result	Some of these transition words ( <i>thus, then, accordingly, consequently, therefore, henceforth</i> ) are time words that are used to show that <i>after</i> a particular time there was a <b>consequence</b> or an <b>effect</b> . Note that <i>for</i> and <i>because</i> are placed before the cause/reason. The other devices are placed before the consequences or effects.		
	as a result under those circumstances in that case for this reason in effect	for thus because the then hence	consequently therefore thereupon forthwith accordingly henceforth
Conclusion/Summary / Restatement	These transition words and phrases <b>conclude, summarize</b> and/or <b>restate</b> ideas, or indicate a final <b>general statement</b> . Also, some words (like <i>therefore</i> ) from the <b>effect/consequence</b> category can be used to summarize.		
	as can be seen generally speaking in the final analysis all things considered as shown above in the long run given these points as has been noted in a word for the most part	after all in fact in summary in conclusion in short in brief in essence to summarize on balance altogether overall ordinarily usually	by and large to sum up on the whole in any event in either case all in all obviously ultimately definitely

Adapted from Smart-Words (2013)

## Articles

Another place where students often experience problems is with their articles. These can be much harder in English than in other languages. Even English-speaking people can rarely explain to you how they work, go on, go and ask one. Go on, don't be shy. See, they had no idea what you were talking about did they? There are three articles in English are **a**, **an** and **the**, and you need to

decide noun-by-noun which one of the articles to use. In fact, there are four choices to make, because sometimes no article is necessary. The issue is that native speakers and writers use the articles correctly without thinking, and so mistakes really jump out, even if they can't explain why. So, here is a quick guide to using articles like a native speaker.

The first step in choosing the right article is knowing if the noun is **countable** or **uncountable** in its context. If the noun **can** have a number in front of it (*1 teacher, 3 books, 76 computers, 1,000,000 people*) it is countable. And so conversely an *uncountable* noun is a noun that **cannot** have a number put in front of it (*1 water, 2 lucks, 10 airs, 21 oils, 39 informations* all sound wrong). Once you have worked out this, you can simply follow these rules very helpfully laid out in the blog *englishedubloginsal* (n.d.):

### Uncountable nouns

- You cannot say **a/an** with an uncountable noun.
- You cannot put a number in front of an uncountable noun. (You cannot make an uncountable noun plural.)
- You use an uncountable noun with no article if you mean that thing *in general*.
- You use **the** with an uncountable noun when you are talking about a particular example of that thing.

### Countable nouns

- You can put a number in front of a count noun. (You can make a count noun plural.)
- You can put both **a/an** and **the** in front of a count noun.
- You **must** put an article in front of a singular count noun.
- You use a plural count noun with no article if you mean all or any of that thing.
- You usually use **a/an** with a count noun the first time you say or write that noun.
- You use **the** with count nouns:
  - the second and subsequent times you use the noun in a piece of speech or writing
  - when the listener knows what you are referring to (maybe because there is only one of that thing)
- You use **an** (not **a**) when the next word (adverb, adjective, noun) starts with a vowel sound.

**Caution**

- The rules cited above apply both when there is (or there is not) an adjective before the noun.
- Some nouns can be either *countable* or *uncountable*; which depends on the meaning and context:
  - Do you have paper? I want to draw a picture. (uncountable = a sheet of paper)
  - Can you get me **a** paper when you're at the shop? (countable = a newspaper)
- Uncountable nouns are often preceded by phrases such as: *a load of ... (luck)*, *a piece of ... (chocolate)*, *a bottle of ... (orange juice)*, *a grain of ... (wheat)*.

## Tenses

Another area of English that we often get wrong is the tenses, and this is a particular problem in academic writing. Most of what we write is in a past tense (apart from proposals about forthcoming work), but we need to change tense depending on whether a debate or idea is ongoing or if the authors are alive or not. Here is a quick reference guide to help you with the tenses. Remember though, this is just a quick guide, and you might need to check a grammar book too.

Tense	Example	Explanation
Simple Present	I use Twitter every day.	Here you want to say that it happens regularly.
Present Progressive	I'm using Twitter now.	Here you want to say that it is happening at the moment.
Simple Past	I used Twitter yesterday.	You did it yesterday, it happened in the past.
Past Progressive	I was using Twitter the whole evening.	You were doing it in the past. It's not sure whether the action was finished or not.
Present Perfect	I have just used Twitter.	You have just finished it. So, it has a connection to the present. Maybe your laptop is still on.
Present Perfect Progressive	I have been using Twitter for 2 hours.	You want to say how long you have been doing it. You started in the past and it continues up to the present.

<b>Tense</b>	<b>Example</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Past Perfect	I had used Twitter before Susan came.	The two actions are related to each other: you had finished with Twitter, and after that Susan arrived.
Past Perfect Progressive	I had been using Twitter when Susan came.	Here you want to point out how long you had been doing it before Susan came.
Will-future	I will use Twitter next week.	This is a prediction; you can probably do something else.
Going to-future	I'm going to use Twitter this afternoon.	This is a plan you've made.
Future Progressive	I will be using Twitter next Sunday.	You do it every Sunday (as usual).
Future Perfect	I will have used Twitter by tomorrow.	You will have done it before tomorrow.
Conditional Simple	I would use Twitter.	You'll probably do it.
Conditional Progressive	I would be using Twitter.	You'll probably do it. Here you concentrate more on the progress of the action.
Conditional Perfect	I would have used Twitter.	You'll probably have finished using Twitter at a special time in the future. Here you concentrate on the fact (Twitter).
Conditional Perfect Progressive	I would have been using Twitter.	You'll probably have finished using Twitter at a special time in the future. Here you concentrate on the progress of using (Twitter).

Adapted from English-Hilfen (n.d.)

### Nominalization

We can also turn our writing into something more professional sounding by using nominalization, which is easier to do than it is to say. A key part of academic writing is the process of nominalization turns verbs (actions) into nouns (things, concepts, or people). This makes the tone of your writing sounds more abstract and more formal. So basically nominalization, like the use of passive voice, gives the impression of being a proper academic.

### *How to do normalization*

Nominalization allows you to discuss more abstract concepts by taking the focus off the action and making the action into a concept or idea. To do this;

1. Identify the event/action
2. Change this verb to a noun form
3. Make this noun form definite (if appropriate)  
— This is now the head noun.
4. Add 'of what' to the head noun (if necessary).



× Online hate crime was increasing rapidly and the police were becoming concerned.

*Becomes...*

✓ The rapid **increase** in online hate crime was causing **concern** amongst the police.

× The Guardian leaked the Panama Papers in 2016. This was the immediate cause of a new wave of investigative journalism

*Becomes...*

✓ The Guardian's **leaking** of the Panama Papers in 2016 **caused** a new wave of investigative journalism.

### **Unity**

And finally, we have to ensure that everything has unity. Unity is related to two main aspects; every sentence is related to the main topic, and every paragraph has cohesion. This can be done through the use of pronouns, repetition of key nouns, synonyms, antonyms, and transition signals. Here are a set of examples of how to use each of these:

**Pronouns:** Johannes Gutenberg invented the first practical printing press in 1436, and continued to refine **it** until 1440. **This** resulted in the rapid production and dissemination of affordable books, which fostered unprecedented development of the sciences, arts and religion.

**Repetition:** Johannes Gutenberg invented the first practical printing press in 1436, and continued to refine it until 1440. The new **printing press** resulted in the rapid production and dissemination of affordable books, which fostered unprecedented development of the sciences, arts and religion.

**Synonyms:** Johannes Gutenberg invented the first practical printing press in 1436, and continued to refine it until 1440. This **mechanical innovation** resulted in the rapid production and dissemination of affordable books, which fostered unprecedented development of the sciences, arts and religion.

**Antonyms:** Johannes Gutenberg invented the first practical printing press in 1436, and continued to refine it until 1440. Without the rapidly increased production and dissemination of affordable books, that ensued, development of the sciences, arts and religion would have **languished**.

**Transitional signals:** Johannes Gutenberg invented the first practical printing press in 1436, and continued to refine it until 1440. **Consequently**, the rapid production and dissemination of affordable books, which fostered unprecedented development of the sciences, arts and religion, was possible.

\* \* \*

We are heading towards the end of this book, and we have many of the mechanics of writing sorted, from reading, referencing, grammar and unity. We now need to know how we actually apply all these things in the framework of an essay, or a larger dissertation piece of work. Over the next chapters, we will start to bring together the different elements of writing, and introduce some final ideas.

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