

Proofreading for language problems

Subject-Verb agreement

The local representative, uncertain as to the extent of her powers and dependent on the support of groups and individuals spread throughout the counties of the south west, ~~were~~ **was** ready to vote for constitutional change.

Missing –s

Sometimes students ask if they can eat the rabbit that live on the UEA campus.

(It's rabbits, of course.)

The price of food ~~have~~ **has** risen since the start of the year.

Tenses

In their paper, the researchers demonstrate that, although the terms 'force' and 'interaction' are often seen as interchangeable concepts, their meanings are clearly distinct from one another. Their experiments **showed** that every force, attractive or repulsive, from friction to electromagnetism, from gravitational attraction to nuclear decay, ~~was~~ **is** the result of fundamental particle interactions. A force ~~could~~ **can** therefore be defined as something which ~~acted~~ **acts** on a particle because of the presence of other particles, whereas an interaction can encompass every force acting on it, including those of decay and annihilation.

Commented [CB1]: Here showed (ie past tense) is OK because the writer is reporting a particular series of experiments which has finished

Commented [CB2]: In these cases, however, the writer is reporting conclusions which are universal (ie facts), for which you need to use the present tense

Consistency with tense use is the most important thing.

Pronouns /determiners

1. The President refused to accept the Prime Minister's ultimatum. It was obvious that **he** was exceeding **his** authority.

Here it is not clear whose authority is being exceeded, the President's or the Prime Minister's.

2. The article questioned the evidence which the research claimed to have disclosed. **It** was biased.

It is not clear whether it is the article, the evidence or the research which is biased.

3. The powers of monarchs are tacitly endorsed by the citizens and subjects of their states, while those of elected governments sometimes seem precarious. **They** demonstrate the fallibility of constitutional rigidity.

Here **they** might refer to one, some or all of the following:
powers, monarchs, citizens and subjects, states, those, governments

4. Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette preferred the artificiality of live at Versailles to the squalor surrounding them at the Louvre. This alienated peasant and bourgeois alike.

In this example, 'this' refers to the ideas that are contained in the first sentence. The precise meaning of 'this' can be made clearer by following it with a noun:

*Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette preferred the artificiality of live at Versailles to the squalor surrounding them at the Louvre. **This preference** alienated peasant and bourgeois alike.*

Perhaps the following version is even clearer:

*Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette preferred the artificiality of live at Versailles to the squalor surrounding them at the Louvre. **This preference of the monarchs** alienated peasant and bourgeois alike.*

As a rule of thumb, in order to make your text more cohesive and easier for the reader to follow, when you use 'this' it is a good idea to follow it with further information about what 'this' refers to.

Prepositions

These are the small words like of, to, from, into (etc) which are normally followed by a noun or pronoun. The best way to check which preposition tends to be used with a particular word is to look that word up in a dictionary (note though that dictionaries are records of how words *are* or *can be* used, not with how they *should* be used!).

Sometimes (though not often) British and American English differ. For example:

The number of books I had to read at UEA was different than what I expected.

In British English it's more common to say things are *different from* (or to a lesser extent *different to*), not *different than*. If you want to use the word than, then you can replace *different* with *other*.

Articles

This is a very complicated area of grammar, but the fundamental rule which normally applies is this:

Use *a/an* when the reader does not know what instance of a thing is being referred to. Use *the* when they do know.

A boy was playing with his friends. The boy was laughing.

In the first sentence the reader does not know which boy (from all the boys in the world) is being talked about, so *a* is used. In the second sentence *the* makes it clear that it's the boy in the previous sentence that is being referred to.

The British Prime Minister had a long discussion with his French counterpart.

There's only one British Prime Minister, so the reader knows who is being talked about, and hence *the* is used.

Less/fewer

If you can count it, it's *fewer*. If you can't count it, it's *less*.

John has less experience than Mary but she has fewer qualifications.

Relative clauses

A relative clause is used when you wish to combine into one sentence two sentences that are about the same thing. There are two types of relative clause: defining and non-defining.

A defining relative clause includes information which is essential if the reader is to understand what instance of a thing is being referred to.

*The policeman **who was on TV last night** was in my class at school.*

The clause *who was on TV last night* makes it clear which policeman (out of all possible policemen) was in my class at school.

A non-defining relative clause gives extra information about the thing which is being referred to, but the reader would still be able to understand what instance of a thing is being referred to if this information was not included.

*The University of East Anglia, **which was founded in 1963**, has approximately 15,000 students.*

The reader knows it's the University of East Anglia which has approximately 15,000 students: they don't need to know when it was founded in order to do so.

IMPORTANT!

Your punctuation here is crucial. Defining relative clauses are NOT separated from the rest of the sentence by commas, but non-defining relative clauses are separated. This rule is important because your use (or non-use) of commas tells your reader how important the different parts of your sentence are (ie they can skim over the bits separated by the commas and still understand what's happening).

Punctuation

There are optional *conventions* (based on personal preferences) and absolute rules .

Example of a convention: using an exclamation mark to express surprise: you don't have to do this, but you can if you want.

Example of a rule: using a capital letter at the start of a sentence.

Commas are sometimes essential, but sometimes it's a question of preference.

Apostrophes can indicate either that something is missing (as in *doesn't*) or possession (John's book).

It's ALWAYS means either *it is* or *it has*. If you mean 'belonging to it' there is no apostrophe: *its*.

Problems (and arguments) arise when people elevate their personal preferences into absolute rules!

Comparisons

It's important to compare like with like.

The findings of the social work committee provided a more reliable indicator than the chairman.

Here the comparison is being made between 'findings' and a person, rather than with other findings. Hence it would be more accurate to write:

*The findings of the social work committee provided a more reliable indicator than **those of the** chairman.*

This idea of 'comparing like with like' means that it's normally a good idea to use the same grammatical construction when you are referring to two or more things that you are comparing (or, in fact, if you are drawing any other kind of relationship between them), thus:

*Surgical intervention was responsible for the perceived variations in survival rates, demographic stability and ~~increasing~~ **the increase in** the life span of older residents.*

Tautologies

This is a last and final call for passengers on Flight BA123 to New York.

Last and final mean the same thing.

Finding a cure for the HIV virus is one of the biggest challenges facing the world today.

The V in HIV means 'virus'.

Too many nouns

The University of East Anglia Dean of Students' Office stationery order form.

This is not very nice but is just about OK!

The University of East Anglia Dean of Students' Office stationery order form signature box

This is too awkward, so although the following is still quite long, it's better:

The signature box on The University of East Anglia Dean of Students' Office stationery order form.

Hanging participle

Walking down the road at night, the trees seemed to be following me.

This implies that it's the trees who were walking, not me.

Chris Bishop, UEA Dean of Students' Office July 2011

Some examples from Kirton, B & Macmillan, K. (2007). *Just Write*. London. Routledge