

How do I improve my grammar? (Native Speakers)

This resource accompanies the WDC video 'You Ask the WDC: How do I improve my grammar?' on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/RzUrA92fBMQ>

Whether you've always prided yourself on your writing, or have always felt a bit underconfident about it, it can be painful to be told as a native speaker that your grammar is wrong. Our writing is a part of our identity, our 'voice' on the page, and different styles and standards are appropriate in different situations. Don't worry, you can write! Let's look at how you can make sure your writing fits the particular demands of university assessment.

Grammar and Academic Writing:

Grammar concerns the correct usage of words and how they are combined into phrases and sentences. These 'rules' for English are often quite irregular and can seem a bit random.

Grammar is often included in marking criteria and may be mentioned in feedback. It's not as important as the quality of your thinking but may impact on the reader's perception of your work. It may also be seen as one of the professional attributes of a graduate.

Why are grammatical mistakes happening?

Issues with grammar are often interpreted as signs of a lack of care, but that's not the only reason that errors can happen...

- Depending on when you were at school, some native speakers may never have been taught the grammar of their own language formally
- We all have the odd blind spot – things we've been writing for years and never realised were wrong
- Issues such as dyslexia can impact on our ability to pick up on these things
- Mistakes happen! Errors can be overlooked! Not all work can be done under ideal circumstances.

Some of the main causes:

- It's not grammar. Sometimes readers just get the sense that something doesn't look quite right with a piece of writing, can't quite identify what it is, and assume it's grammar.

It might equally be an aspect of style or structure that's just a bit unconventional for academic writing. Get a second opinion from a WDC tutor, personal tutor or grammar-expert friend.

- It's not a grammar mistake. Some grammar issues are a matter of personal taste (such as the Oxford comma), but some people do have strong opinions on such things! If your first language is English, but not British English, you may be using a variation of grammar or spelling that's perfectly correct in your native variety (US, Canadian, Australian, Indian etc). Your marker may not be familiar with it or realise it's a legitimate variation. As long as you're writing consistently in one English or another, it's fine - you don't have to write in a British accent! Follow any stated 'house style rules on personal taste or varieties of English, but otherwise, your own style is up to you.
- You're trying too hard. Academic writing is often more formal and complex than normal styles of communication, and it may feel unfamiliar. However, it's easy to overdo it, and as sentences get longer and more complicated, they start to break down under their own weight and errors start to creep in. Clarity is the most important feature of academic writing – shortening your sentences may help.
- You need an editing phase. You're already doing so much when you write: working out your ideas, planning and structuring them, thinking about how to express them, backing your points up – that trying to include grammar in all of this may lead to overload. If your writing process doesn't include a phase (either as you go, or near the end) where you proofread for grammar, spelling, typos and formatting inconsistencies, they may be overlooked.

What to do:

Do a diagnostic. You need to know:

- Is this just a couple of instances, or lots of them throughout the work?
- How serious are the errors – a minor niggle, or getting in the way of your ideas being understood?
- Is it one or two things repeated, or a broader range of issues?
- What are the issues exactly, and what grammatical terms would you need to look up?
- You could talk to your marker, personal tutor, peer mentor, grammatically-inclined friend or make an appointment with a WDC tutor.

Identify the issue. As a native speaker, we're usually dealing with a small handful of issues. It's probably:

- Punctuation: apostrophes, commas, colons and semicolons
- Sentence structure: run-on sentences (two whole sentences linked by only a comma, instead of separated with a full stop) or fragment sentences (a phrase that isn't complete enough to be a sentence in its own right, as it doesn't have a finite verb)
- Ambiguous use of pronouns (what does 'it' or 'they' refer to? Could be more than one thing)
- Lack of agreement between parts of sentences (usually subject and verb) – can happen in overly long and complicated sentences where you lose track.

Next steps:

- Once you've identified the issue and the grammar terminology used to refer to it, look it up in a grammar book or online grammar resource. You don't need to read the whole thing, just target the one or two areas you need. If one explanation doesn't make sense to you, find a different resource which explains it in a way which makes more sense to you.
- Make your learning active – don't just read a grammar resource, see if you can recite the grammar rule from memory, or explain it back to yourself in your own words. Repeat this process at intervals over a period of time.
- You could do any tests that come with grammar books or online resources, but you could also:
- make sure you pay attention when you're reading academic books or journal articles to watch out for that grammar point
- when you're writing, make sure you deliberately check for that point after each paragraph as you go, or at the very end of the writing process.

For more guidance on your learning, book a 1-2-1 tutorial with one of our Writing Development Centre tutors or visit our website for more activities and resources <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/library/resources-and-study-support/writing-development-centre/>

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