



Let's Connect

**A Very Short Guide
to Clearer Writing**



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to Clearer Writing**

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Foreword

Dear Reader

The Speak Good English Movement aims to help Singaporeans strengthen their ability to use Standard English confidently, while appreciating the richness of our multilingual society.

Grammar Rules was launched in 2017 and was an encouraging success – more than 100,000 copies were distributed to schools and workplaces and collected by members of the public, many of whom found the short and engagingly written chapters useful in helping them revise grammar rules they had long forgotten.

The Movement felt that a follow-up was timely, especially now that generative AI (GenAI) has become a big part of our daily lives. The focus of this booklet is different: it offers not *more* grammar rules, but tips and suggestions on writing to communicate effectively and on how to seek answers to common questions about English. Hence, the chapters in this booklet tell the readers what resources are available

(e.g. online dictionaries) and how to use them, discusses the differences between Singapore English, British English and American English, examines the use of punctuation, and offers tips on how to write more clearly and effectively.

Even with GenAI baked into the writing tools we use and capable of doing all the writing for us, the ability to write clearly and accurately is still a useful skill to have. Indeed, as texts have now begun to sound the same because of the use of GenAI tools, it is more important than ever before for us to take control of the writing process, so that we do not lose our own unique voice and identity.

We hope you'll find this book interesting and useful.

Happy reading and writing,

The Speak Good English Movement

CHAPTER

1

Grammar and Writing Resources



Many of us write something every day – whether it's a text message to a friend, a caption for a social media post, or an essay. In this chapter, we will introduce you to some online resources you can consult whenever you have questions about English grammar or usage.

■ USING A DICTIONARY

These days, many of us don't own a physical copy of a dictionary. Fortunately, whenever we need to look up the meaning of a word – for example, *erudite* – all we have to do is type 'erudite means' or 'erudite meaning' into a search engine, and we'll get the answer in seconds. (By the way, typing 'erudite synonym' will find words with meanings similar to that of *erudite*, while 'erudite antonym' will find words with opposite meanings.)

In this section, we'll look at the main features of an online dictionary and discuss how to interpret the details given about words we're looking up. Some useful online dictionaries include Cambridge, Oxford, Longman and Collins, while Merriam-Webster is handy for American English.

Headword

When we look up a word in a dictionary, we find entries listed in alphabetical order. Each word that begins an entry is called a *headword*, which is the basic form of a word, without additions such as *s/es* for plural or *d/ed* for past tense.

Usually, the first information that is given is the pronunciation of the word, often in UK English and US English, and in IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols or some other spelling system, e.g.:

dancer UK /'da:nsə/ US /'dænsə-/

Fortunately, most online dictionaries also provide an audio recording so you can hear exactly how the word is pronounced.

Meaning

Many words in English have more than one meaning, or sense, so most headwords will come with multiple lines of explanations and examples. For example, the word *fecund* has two main meanings:

fecund 1. producing or able to produce many crops, fruit, young animals, etc.: *fecund fields*. 2. producing many ideas, new things, etc.: *a fecund imagination*.

When looking up the meaning of a word, do read the example sentences to decide whether the word is appropriate for the meaning you wish to convey. Bear in mind that some words can have meanings that are very different, such as the word *sanction*:

sanction 1. to officially permit something: *The newly elected government will sanction military cooperation with its erstwhile enemy*. 2. to punish someone for something, especially officially: *Under the new law, employers of illegal immigrants will be sanctioned*.

Style and usage labels

Immediately after each entry, you may see labels such as *formal*, *informal*, *slang*, *literary*, *offensive*, *disapproving* and *archaic*. These labels are important as they'll help you decide if the word you're looking up is appropriate for your needs.

Take the adjective *abstruse*, for example. In a dictionary, it is labelled 'formal', so it would be appropriate to use it in a report or academic essay. But in a text message to a friend, you'd be better off using a less formal word, such as *difficult* or *obscure*. Likewise, if a word is labelled 'slang', you might want to avoid using it in a formal report; and if a word is labelled 'offensive', you should consider a more sensitive expression.

As a further example, the verb *expatiate*, which means 'to speak or write about something in detail for a very long time', is labelled 'disapproving' – so you might use it as a criticism of a speaker (e.g. *the speaker was long-winded*), but not as a compliment (e.g. *the speaker shared many useful insights*).

Parts of speech

When we look up a word in a dictionary, we see that the part of speech to which it belongs – noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, and so on – is indicated. It is important to note this as it will help us use words correctly.

Take the word *stress*, for example. In the dictionary, it is labelled as a noun (e.g. *The modifications put too much stress on the*

engine), and also as a verb (e.g. *They stress the importance of cooperation*). Hence, we should avoid using *stress* as an adjective and use the appropriate adjective form *stressed* instead:

**Tom has been very stress lately.*
(*stress* can be either a noun or verb, hence this is non-standard)

Tom has been very stressed lately.
(*stressed* is an adjective)

(Note that, in the study of languages, an asterisk (*) before an example indicates that it is ungrammatical.)

You may have been told that sentences such as *Do it quick* are ungrammatical, because *quick* is an adjective, and cannot be used as an adverb. However, in a dictionary, you will find an entry such as:

quick *non-standard* quickly, promptly:
Do it quick.

This is because dictionaries are *descriptive* – they describe how a language is used by competent users at a point in its history – rather

than *prescriptive* (prescribing what is correct or incorrect). As we can see from the above example, the editor of the dictionary entry has decided that there are enough English speakers using *quick* as an adverb for this usage to be included in the dictionary, even if some grammarians regard it as non-standard.

Note: Just because a word is in the dictionary does not mean it is always correct or standard; we must also consider whether it is appropriate for our intended purpose.

● **Nouns**

In English, nouns are either countable or uncountable. In a dictionary, each noun entry is typically labelled 'C' (countable) or 'U' (uncountable). If you look up the word *luggage*, you'll see that it is labelled 'U' – this means you can say you have *much luggage* or *less luggage*, but not **many luggages* or **fewer luggages*. (If you are using a word processor like Microsoft Word, the word *luggages* will probably be underlined in red as ungrammatical.)

However, many nouns in English may be either uncountable or countable, for example *choice*:

We don't have much choice, I suppose.
(uncountable)

The restaurant offers only three choices of main course during lunch time.
(countable)

As an uncountable noun, *choice* has a more general meaning, whereas *choices* as a countable noun is more specific.

Another thing to note is that most nouns have regular plural forms, formed by adding *s* or *es*. Nouns that do not follow this rule will have their irregular plural forms listed in a dictionary, e.g.:

alumna, plural **alumnae**

deer, plural **deer**

mouse, plural **mice**

tooth, plural **teeth**

● **Verbs**

Generally, verbs can be transitive or intransitive, and often both.

A transitive verb, often labelled 'T' in the dictionary, is one that transfers an action to an object (someone or something). Take the transitive verb *like*: we can say *Junyuan likes Siti* or *Junyuan likes pizza*, but not **Junyuan likes*.

Conversely, an intransitive verb, often labelled 'I', is one that does not transfer an action to someone or something else, for example *laugh*: we can say *Junyuan laughed* or *Junyuan laughed at the joke*, but not **Junyuan laughed the joke*.

Some verbs come in several parts, and are known as 'multiword verbs'. A dictionary will tell you what pattern the verb takes. For example, *pride* as a verb has the pattern *pride oneself on something* – so we know we need to say *Celine prides herself on her adventurous spirit*, and not **Celine prides herself for her adventurous spirit*.

● **Adjectives**

Most adjectives in English may appear before a noun or after a verb, e.g. *the enormous turnip*; *the turnip is enormous*.

However, some adjectives may be used only after a verb, e.g. *alive*, *awake*. For such verbs, there will be a note in the dictionary stating 'after verb', so we know we can say *The prisoner is alive/awake*, but not **the alive/awake prisoner*.

Conversely, some adjectives may be used only before a noun, e.g. *main* and *mere*. The dictionary will mark these adjectives 'before noun', so that we know we can say *the main problem* or *mere mortal*, but not **The problem is main* or **The mortal is mere*.

■ WEBSITES

Grammar

First, we'll look at some free online resources that can help you brush up on your English grammar.

All resource locations are correct at time of print.

● *Grammar Bytes*

This is a useful site with grammar terms arranged in alphabetical order, so you can quickly look up specific terms and concepts. Tips on how to write and grammar exercises are also included.



Terms



Exercises

● *BBC Learning English*

A comprehensive resource for learners of English. The grammar items are arranged by levels: Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced. Grammar terms are clearly explained, and practice exercises are included.



Basic



Intermediate



Advanced

● *Quick and Dirty Tips*

This site does not explain grammar terms and concepts, but discusses common questions users have about English, such as: *When do I use 'bring' and 'take'? When do I use 'nor'? What is the difference between 'capital' and 'capitol'?*



Writing

Here are some sites that provide help with writing effectively and accurately.



- *Grammarly*

A popular grammar website that explains grammar terms and concepts very clearly, and gives practical tips on how to write.



Handbook



Writing Tips

- *Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)*

Also known as Purdue OWL, this is widely used in universities worldwide.

It is an extensive site that explains grammar rules, how to write, and pitfalls to avoid. There are also useful sections on writing for various purposes, ranging from personal letters to research papers to essays.



- *Microsoft Writing*

Another useful site that begins with essentials of writing for beginners and progresses to topics such as when to use the passive voice, and how to use semicolons and quotation marks.



Grammar checkers

There are two main ways to check your own writing – using either the spelling and grammar checker in your word processing software, or external software such as Grammarly.

● Grammarly

Grammarly has a free grammar-checking site, where you enter text that you have written and click 'Check your text', and it will do an automated analysis of your grammar, spelling, punctuation word choice, and other aspects of writing. You can add the free version of Grammarly as an extension to your browser so that it can even check what you are typing and posting on social media. The paid versions advise you on how to rewrite sentences for clarity, make suggestions on tone and formality, warn you about possible plagiarism, and much more.



● Word/Pages

Most of us do our serious writing using word processing software such as Microsoft Word or Apple's Pages. Both have spelling and grammar checkers included and turned on by default,

and they are quite powerful. They can even make suggestions on style – for example, if you've used a contraction such as *don't* in what otherwise appears to be a formal piece of writing, they will double-underline the word and suggest that you use *do not* instead.

● *Generative AI*

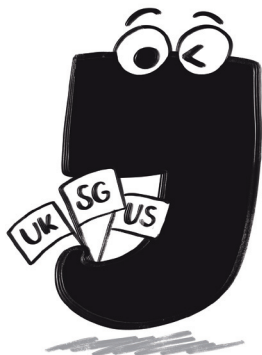
These days, we have generative AI (GenAI) tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini and DeepSeek that can help rewrite our sentences or even entire essays for us. However, some workplaces and institutions may not allow the use of GenAI, and you also risk losing your voice and identity as a writer as GenAI tools tend to produce writing that is recognisably monotonous.

■ **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, we explored the use of online dictionaries and resources such as grammar websites. We hope that, armed with the resources covered in this chapter, you'll enjoy learning more about grammar, and gain confidence in writing!

CHAPTER

2



Singapore English, British English and American English: Some differences

Singapore English – the variety of English spoken in Singapore by Singaporeans – is distinctly different from other varieties of English, such as British English, American English, Malaysian English, Indian English, New Zealand English, Australian English, and Nigerian English.

Singapore English is not a single form of English, but a range of different ways of speaking and writing in a language we call English. At one end of the range, we have what is commonly called 'Singlish' (Singapore Colloquial English), which draws on Malay, Hokkien, Mandarin and other languages adaptably, dynamically reflecting Singapore's multicultural identity. Singlish is used in informal situations between family, friends, and colleagues, and is a colloquial (spoken) variety, although it is also widely used in informal written communication, such as in messages and comments on social media. At the other end, we have Singapore Standard English, which is mainly written and used in formal situations, such as news reports, business meetings, presentations, school assignments and lectures.

As Singapore was formerly a British colony, it's unsurprising that Singapore Standard English

resembles British English, especially in spelling and pronunciation. However, Singapore English is also heavily influenced by American English in terms of spelling, vocabulary and grammar. This is natural, considering that American offerings dominate our English-language media diet.

So, although Singapore English is similar to British English on the surface, it also has many features of American English, and it's often useful to know how these varieties differ. Of course, Singapore English also shows influences of other varieties of English (such as Indian and Australian), but these are less obvious, so we will focus on British English and American English in this chapter.

■ **BRITISH ENGLISH VS AMERICAN ENGLISH**

Have you ever been told that you were mixing British and American spellings? Or wondered what some differences between British and American English are, apart from the more obvious ones in pronunciation and spelling? In this chapter, we'll examine the main differences between British English and American English, and how Singapore English may differ from them.

■ DIFFERENCES IN VOCABULARY

We'll now take a look at some words and phrases that are used differently in British English (BrE) and American English (AmE). Where Singapore English (SgE) differs from both BrE and AmE, this will be explained.

BrE	AmE	SgE
aeroplane	airplane	
aluminium	aluminum	
anticlockwise	counterclockwise	
bill (in a restaurant)	check	
bonnet (front of a car)	hood	
boot (back of a car)	trunk	
car park	parking lot	SgE uses the term <i>car park</i> the way BrE does, but uses <i>parking lot</i> or <i>lot</i> to mean 'parking space/spot/slot'.
cinema	movie theater	

floor: ground floor = first floor=	first floor second floor	SgE uses the word <i>floor</i> in the same way as in AmE.
driving licence	driver's license	
film	movie	
flat	apartment	In SgE, <i>flat</i> is generally used for HDB blocks, and <i>apartment</i> for private residences.
garden	yard	
holiday	vacation (In AmE, the term <i>holiday</i> refers to a one-day public holiday, and <i>the holidays</i> is the period from late December to early January, which includes Christmas, Hanukkah and the New Year.)	
lift	elevator	
lorry	truck	

an assignment <u>mark/grade</u> ; to <u>mark</u> an assignment	an assignment <u>grade</u> ; to <u>grade</u> an assignment	In SgE and BrE, <i>grade</i> refers mainly to letter grade.
mobile phone; mobile	cell phone; cell	handphone
number plate	license plate	
pavement	sidewalk	
pay rise	pay raise	
petrol	gasoline/gas	
post	mail	
(potato) chips	french fries	
(potato) crisps	potato chips	
tick	check	
toilet	restroom/bathroom	

Many other words in SgE are used differently from BrE and AmE. Here are a few of them:

alphabet: In BrE and AmE, the word *alphabet* refers to the entire set of letters, i.e. there are 26 letters in the English alphabet. However, many SgE speakers use *letter* interchangeably with *alphabet*, and so would say that there are 26 alphabets in English.

cooling: In SgE, *cooling* is used interchangeably with *cool*, e.g. *cooling/cool weather*. In BrE/AmE, the word *cooling* as an adjective means having the effect of making something less warm, e.g. *a cooling swim*.

hex: In SgE, the symbol # is typically used for apartment numbers and the symbol itself is called 'hex'; hence, #17-03 would be read out as 'hex seventeen dash zero three'. In AmE, however, it would be read out as 'number seventeen zero three', and the symbol # may be referred to as 'hash sign'.

horn: In SgE, *horn* is used as a verb, e.g. *I horned at the distracted driver*. In BrE/AmE, this would be expressed as *I honked/sounded my horn at the distracted driver*.

in-charge (IC): In SgE, an *in-charge* or *IC* is a person who is charge of something, e.g. a *games IC* might be a student appointed to take charge of games at a school camp. (This term is not unique to Singapore, but it is used much more frequently in SgE.)

keep: In SgE, if you tell someone to 'please keep this book', you may mean 'please have this

book' or 'please put this book away'. In BrE/AmE, however, the second meaning is not possible.

off day: In BrE/AmE, a *day off* is a day when you're off work. In SgE, this is usually called an *off day*; however, in BrE/AmE, an *off day* is a day when you are not performing at your best.

ward: In BrE/AmE, a person is *admitted to hospital* or *hospitalised*. In SgE, however, a person is *warded* or *warded in hospital*.

wash up: In SgE, *wash up* may mean 'have a bath/shower'. However, in BrE, *wash up* means 'wash the dishes', while in AmE it means to wash one's face and hands.

wear: In BrE/AmE, if you're wearing your shoes, a shirt, a hat or spectacles, you already have them on you (after already having put them on). In SgE, the word *wear* may also mean 'put on'.

■ DIFFERENCES IN SPELLING

Apart from differences in pronunciation (which will not be covered in this booklet), there are obvious spelling differences in BrE and AmE. Here are some of them:



BrE	AmE
axe	ax
cheque	check
cosy	cozy
disc	disk
doughnut	donut
grey	gray
jewellery	jewelry
kerb (edge of pavement)	curb
manoeuvre	maneuver
maths	math
mould	mold

BrE	AmE
moustache	mustache
per cent	percent
programme (but <i>program</i> in computing)	program
pyjamas	pajamas
sceptic, sceptical	skeptic, skeptical
storey, storeys	story, stories
sulphur	sulfur
titbit	tidbit
tyre	tire

Generally, except for *disk*, *donut*, *percent* and *tidbit*, SgE prefers the BrE spellings above, although this varies from one person to another. An interesting one to watch is *math*, which is now common in SgE and may already have overtaken *maths*. Another thing to note is that many AmE spellings are also common in BrE, for example *donut*.

There are other differences in spelling between BrE and AmE. As the following are seen systematically in many words, they will be discussed in groups rather than in alphabetical order.

ae/e; oe/e

Generally, where words of Latin and Greek origin have *ae* or *oe* in BrE, they are spelt with *e* in AmE:

However, BrE prefers *e* to *ae* in some words, such as *encyclopedia* and *medieval*.

BrE	AmE
anaemia	anemia
anaesthetic	anesthetic
foetus	fetus
diarrhoea	diarrhea
haemorrhage	hemorrhage
leukaemia	leukemia
paediatrician	pediatrician

our/or

Where BrE has words ending in *our*, AmE has *or*:

In BrE, some words with *our* drop the *u* before certain word endings such as *ous*, e.g. *humorous, glamorous, rigorous, vigorous* (not *humourous, glamorous, rigorous, vigorous*).

However, the *u* is not dropped before certain word endings in words such as *honourable, labourer, colourful* and *humourless*.

BrE	AmE
behaviour	behavior
colour	color
favour	favor
flavour	flavor
harbour	harbor
honour	honor
labour	labor
neighbour	neighbor
rumour	rumor

re/er

In BrE, words ending in *re* are spelt with *er* in AmE:

Note that the variation *metre/meter* applies only to the unit of

BrE	AmE
centre	center
fibre	fiber
litre	liter
metre	meter
spectre	specter
theatre	theater

measure; where the word refers to an instrument for measuring something, the spelling is *meter* in both BrE and AmE, e.g. *electricity meter*.

ce/se

In some nouns, BrE has *ce* while AmE has *se*, giving the BrE/AmE pairs *defence/defense*, *offence/offense* and *pretence/pretense*.

In BrE, *se* is used for the verbs *license* and *practise* (e.g. *The government will license the new vendors next month; The violinists must practise harder*) but *ce* for the nouns *licence* and *practice* (e.g. *The new vendor has obtained a licence; The violinists need more practice*).

By contrast, AmE uses *practice* as both verb and noun (e.g. *The violinists must practice harder/ The violinists need more practice*) and *license* as both verb and noun (e.g. *The government will license the new vendors next month; The new vendor has obtained a license*).

For the pair of words *advise/advice*, however, both BrE and AmE distinguish between the verb and noun, e.g. *We advise you to remain silent* (verb); *We gave you good advice* (noun).

l/l

When the final syllable of a word ending in *l* is not stressed, the final *l* is doubled in BrE, e.g. *counselled, counselling, counsellor, signalled, signalling, signaller, travelled, travelling, traveller. In AmE, however, the *l* is not doubled: *counseled, counseling, counselor, signaled, signaling, signaler, traveled, traveling, traveler*.*

BrE and AmE also differ in word pairs such as the following (BrE/AmE): *skilful/skillful; wilful/willful; fulfil/fulfill; enrol/enroll*.

ise/ize

In AmE, words such as the following are spelt with *ize*: *apologize, criticize, organize* (also *organization*), *realize* (also *realization*), *recognize*. The use of *z* also extends to words such as *analyze, catalyze* and *paralyze*.

Although it is widely believed that *ize* is American spelling, and *ise*, British, this is untrue: in BrE, some writers use *ise* while others (including reputable publishers such as Oxford University Press and Longman) use *ize*: *apologise/apologize; criticise/criticize; organise/organize* (also *organisation* or *organization*); *realise/realize*

(also *realisation* or *realization*); *recognise/recognize*. However, most BrE writers who normally use *ize* would not use *ize* in *analyse*, *catalyse* and *paralyse*.

Some words are never spelt with *z* in either BrE or AmE, e.g. *advertise*, *circumcise*, *comprise*, *compromise*, *demise*, *despise*, *disguise*, *exercise*, *franchise*, *improvise*, *merchandise*, *premise*, *revise*, *supervise*, *surprise*.

■ DIFFERENCES IN GRAMMAR

There are numerous differences in grammar between BrE and AmE, but we will look at only two of them here: collective nouns and past-tense verb forms.

Collective nouns

In BrE, collective nouns – nouns that refer to collections of individuals – are often treated as plural subjects even if they are singular in form. To illustrate, in BrE it is common to say *The committee have worked out their differences* (rather than *has worked*) because the emphasis is on the members interacting as individuals, rather than as a single entity. Likewise, it is

common in BrE to say *The family/management/team/squad agree with the decision*. By contrast, AmE generally treats collective nouns as singular subjects, hence *The committee has come to a conclusion; The family/management/team/squad agrees with the decision*.

Like AmE, SgE generally treats collective nouns as singular subjects, with one notable exception: in sports journalism, SgE follows BrE practice in treating teams as plural subjects, e.g. *Chelsea/The team/England are in fine form*.

Past-tense verb forms

The following verbs have two past-tense forms: *burnt/burned, dreamt/dreamed, dwelt/dwelled, knelt/kneeled, leant/leaned, learnt/learned, smelt/smelled, spelt/spelled, spilt/spilled, spoilt/spoiled*. While both forms are found in BrE and AmE, BrE generally prefers the *t* forms (e.g. *dreamt*) while AmE prefers the *ed* forms (e.g. *dreamed*).

AmE has past-tense forms that are not used in BrE, e.g. *We dove into the freezing pool; They snuck in while the security guard was asleep; The single mother pled with the judge for leniency*. In BrE, the underlined verbs would be *dived, sneaked* and *pleaded*.

Although SgE tends to use the same past-tense verb forms as BrE, the AmE forms *dove* and *snuck* seem to be becoming more popular, especially among younger Singaporeans.

■ RESOURCES

To find out more about the differences between BrE and AmE, an excellent resource is the book *What you need to know about British & American English* by George Davidson (published by Learners Publishing, 2004).

There are also numerous articles on the Internet that discuss the differences, such as the following:



British Council



Grammarly

■ CONCLUSION

As we've seen from the examples discussed above, SgE is generally closer to BrE (especially in spelling) but is also heavily influenced by AmE. Sometimes, we are advised to use British English throughout. However, this is an impossible task, considering that Singapore ceased to be a British colony a long time ago, and that BrE itself has absorbed many AmE influences, and continues to do so.

Having said that, it is always good practice to be as consistent as possible. For example, if we decide to use the spelling *organize* instead of *organise*, then we should also use spellings such as *organization*, *realize*, *recognize* and *sanitize* in the rest of the document rather than *organisation*, *realise*, *recognise* and *sanitise*. Similarly, if we use the spelling *behavior*, then we should also use spellings such as *harbor* and *neighbor* throughout, and not alternate between *behavior* and *behaviour*, or *neighbor* and *neighbour*.

[illegible]

CHAPTER

3

How To Write Clearly



~~Exactly~~ the same.

When we write, we sometimes get carried away and produce long sentences that only we understand, but our readers may not. Why does that happen? Perhaps our grammar or sentence construction is imprecise and perplexing. Perhaps we did not provide enough information, or perhaps the information we presented is unorganised and thus confusing. As we write, therefore, we should take a step back every now and then and check if we are writing clearly. Does our writing say what we intend to say?

(I) GRAMMATICAL CONSIDERATIONS

To that end, the most basic consideration is grammatical accuracy. The following are questions we can ask ourselves as we check for readability and clarity.

Does my sentence have a subject? Is it clear who did what, and to whom?

For a sentence to be clear, the reader needs to be able to identify the subject, verb, object and other parts of the sentence. In a sentence in the active voice, the subject is the doer of the action, while the object is the receiver of the action:

Nazreen wrote the song.
subject verb object
(doer) (receiver)

Sometimes, when certain parts of a sentence are longer, the resulting sentence can be confusing to the reader. For example:

He provided a man notorious for operating several illegal gambling dens across Singapore with information.

When we ask ourselves 'He provided whom with what?' we see that the recipient of the information is *a man notorious for operating several illegal gambling dens across Singapore*. To make it easier for the reader to understand, we can move this further back in the sentence, e.g. *He provided information to a man notorious for operating several illegal gambling dens across Singapore.*

Should we use the active voice or the passive voice?

Consider the following sentences:

Nazreen wrote the song. (active voice)
The song was written by Nazreen. (passive voice)

Although the two sentences mean the same thing, they're slightly different in that the active sentence puts emphasis on the doer, *Nazreen*, while the passive sentence puts emphasis on the receiver, *the song*.

Another thing to note is that the passive voice is useful when you do not want to mention the doer of the action, either because it is understood from context or not particularly important (as in the first sentence below) or you do not want to come across as too accusatory (as in the second sentence):

The investigation has been completed
(by the police).

The fish has been eaten (by your cat).

When it is important to identify the doer, however, the passive voice should be avoided. In notes of a meeting, for example, it is important to record who said what, or who will do what, so *The manager agreed to review the training of new officers* (active voice) would be preferable to *The training of new officers will be reviewed* (passive voice).

Do my verbs agree with my subjects?

In English, verbs agree with subjects, so if we have a plural subject, the verb should be in the plural form, e.g.:

*The student **has** made good progress this semester.* (singular subject, singular verb)

*The students **have** made good progress this semester.* (plural subject, plural verb)

When the subject is a bit more complex, we need to exercise greater care in choosing the right verb form. For example:

The box of old books and clothes were collected this morning. (incorrect)

It may seem natural to use the plural verb *were* in the above sentence since the noun closest to the verb is the plural *clothes*, and *old books and clothes* is plural. However, we need to remember that the main noun in the underlined noun phrase is *box*, so we should say *The box of old books and clothes was collected this morning.* Accordingly, if we had to replace it with a pronoun, we would have to say *It was collected this morning*, and not *They were collected this morning*.

Now, consider the following sentence:

He loves watching sports but hate to exercise. (incorrect)

When we combine clauses, such as *He loves watching sports* and *he hates to exercise*, we may leave out pronouns like the second *he* to avoid repetition. However, we need to remember that the 'missing' *he* still has an effect on the verb, so the sentence should be *He loves watching sports but (he) hates to exercise*, not *He loves watching sports but (he) hate to exercise*.

Are my verbs and tenses correct and consistent?

Consider the following sentence:

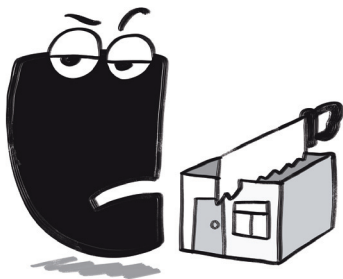
The new employees spoke poor English and do not know their products well. (incorrect)

When we're talking about events that happened within the same time frame, they should be in the same tense – hence, the sentence above should be either consistently in the present tense (i.e. *The new employees speak poor English and do not know their products well*)

or consistently in the past tense (i.e. *The new employees spoke poor English and did not know their products well*).

Now, take a look at the following sentence:

George did not saw the flat before buying it.
(incorrect)



Since it happened in the past, why is *saw* wrong in the above sentence? That's because the verbs *did* and *see* together form a single verb group, and only the first verb, *did*, is required to carry the past tense – hence the sentence should read *George did not see the flat before buying it*.

Do my pronouns clearly indicate who or what they refer to?

Consider the sentences below:

Val wants to visit her mother, but she is ill today.

The students told their mentors about their plans, but they are ambitious.

In the first sentence, the pronoun *she* could refer to either *Val* or *her mother*; so, to ensure clarity, repetition in the second part of the sentence is necessary – *Val wants her mother to visit her, but Val/her mother is ill today*. In the second sentence, *they* could refer to *the students*, *their mentors*, or even *their plans*, so the sentence could be elaborated upon to clear up the ambiguity, e.g. *The students told their mentors about their plans, but their mentors, being ambitious, would like the students to set higher goals.*

Another important thing to remember about pronouns is that they should match the person or thing they are referring to. Take a look at the following examples:

The guest speaker will talk about new technologies and its impact on education.
(incorrect)

Jack spent the whole morning on his four slides, but it contained numerous errors.
(incorrect)

In the first sentence, *new technologies* is plural, hence should be followed by *their*, i.e. *their impact on education*. In the second sentence, *slides* is plural, hence should be followed by *they*, i.e. *they still contain numerous errors*.

(II) PROVIDE CONTEXT

We are usually knowledgeable about the topic we are writing about, but we often forget that others may not be as familiar. This sometimes leads us to omit essential information that is crucial to fully understanding what we want to say.

One of the most common mistakes is leaving out sufficient context, or relevant background information, circumstances or setting around an event, statement, or idea. This is often referred to as the '5W1H' – *who, what, when, where, why* and

possibly, where relevant, *how*.

Without sufficient context, the information is incomplete and therefore, inaccurate. It can be misconstrued, and raise more questions than answers, leaving readers perplexed.

Take this statement for instance:

Bukit Timah Hill is the highest point.

Readers would likely wonder: Is it the highest in the world, or in Singapore?

It would be clearer if we provided a little more context:

Bukit Timah Hill is the highest natural point in Singapore.

Let's look at another example:

Aisha won the chess championship, so people congratulated her.

Unless readers already know the context of this statement, they might ask: What championship is this? Is Aisha the chess champion of Singapore,

or the world? Who are the 'people' mentioned here?

It would be much clearer to say:

Aisha won her school's annual chess tournament, so her friends and family congratulated her.

Similarly, when writing a narrative, try to provide context early.

Consider who your readers are and ask yourself questions like:

- What are they likely to know, or not know?
- What information do they need in order to understand the ideas that I want to communicate? Have I provided that information?
- Does any part of my writing raise further questions for my readers? If it does, plug the gaps in information.

(III) USE CONNECTIVES



Connectives are words or phrases that link sentences, paragraphs and ideas to guide your readers through your writing. Like signposts, they indicate the sequence or development of ideas, flow of information, or change in direction. They help your readers understand how the ideas relate to each other, and what your intended direction is. Connectives are particularly useful in narratives, or an argument or analysis.

Examples of connectives are:

- however, on the other hand, in contrast
- in addition, moreover
- as a result, therefore, consequently
- in spite of, although, despite
- to begin with, firstly, finally

Compare these sentences:

#1. Everyone ran indoors when it began to rain. Ryan went for a walk. He enjoyed being in the rain.

Vs.

#2. Everyone ran indoors when it began to rain. However, Ryan went for a walk because he enjoyed being in the rain.

Without connectives, as in sentence #1, the ideas stand in isolation from each other. But with connectives, in sentence #2, the relation between the ideas becomes clearer, and so too, the sentence.

(IV) WRITE CONCISELY

Writing concisely makes it easier for readers to grasp your ideas quickly and clearly.

Avoid cluttering your sentences with redundant words.

While we are sometimes tempted to use longer phrases to sound more formal, unnecessary wordiness can distract the reader and clutter up your writing. For instance,

Instead of saying *at this point in time*
Say *presently* or *now*.

Instead of *with regard to*
Say *regarding*.

Instead of: *The hut is located at an approximate distance of 50 metres from my house.*

Say: *The hut is about 50 metres away from my house.*

Ask yourself: Does the word add to my meaning? Will it change my meaning or make it less clear if I omitted it? If the answer is “no”, you can safely toss it out.

Bear in mind that these are general guidelines. It is important to strike a balance between being concise and clear, and being too brief to the point of over-simplification or leaving out essential information.

Avoid prepositional phrases.

Such phrases add description to a noun using a preposition such as ‘of’.

Instead of: *The cleaning of public toilets should be carried out on a regular basis.*

Say: *Public toilets should be cleaned regularly.*

(V) USE PRECISE VOCABULARY

Sometimes, one letter can change the meaning of a word. For instance:

complementary/ complimentary

affect/ effect

discreet/ discrete

casual/ causal

break/ brake

scrap/ scrape

imminent/ immanent

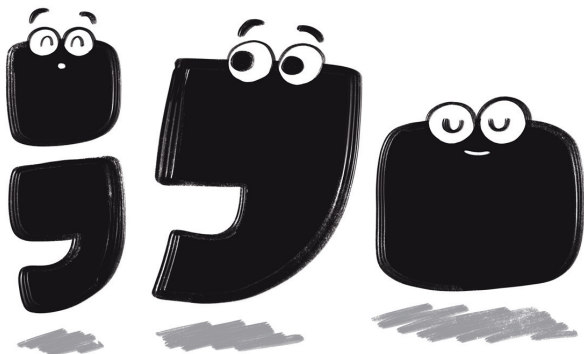
prefect/ perfect

A spellchecker may not pick these up as errors because they are perfectly valid words in English.

CHAPTER

4

Punctuation



To write effectively, we need to know how to use words and how to form grammatical sentences. We also need to understand how to use punctuation to convey ideas accurately. Let's take a look at this example:

I'm giving up eating chocolate for a month.

I'm giving up. Eating chocolate for a month.

As we can see, adding a full stop in the second line makes a complete difference ~~between eating chocolate and not eating chocolate for a month!~~

Although punctuation marks take up so little space on a page, they do such an important job! Let's look at some main punctuation marks and their uses.

■ FULL STOP (.)

Full stops (also called 'periods' in American English) are used to mark the ends of sentences, such as this one.

They're also used in abbreviations, such as the following:

e.g. (from Latin *exempli gratia*, meaning 'for example')

i.e. (from Latin *id est*, meaning 'that is')

etc. (from Latin *et cetera*, meaning 'and so forth')

Note that *e.g.* means 'for example' and not 'example', so avoid writing 'for *e.g.*'.

■ COMMA (,)

Hello  my friend.

The comma may be one of the most common punctuation marks, but it's also one of the most difficult to use properly.

Breaking up sentences

The simplest use of a comma is to break up a sentence into meaningful parts, for example by separating supporting parts of a sentence (such as the underlined words below) from the main part of a sentence, as follows:

If you're adventurous, you can try her cooking.

Next month, our new flat will be ready.

Honestly, your haircut looks terrible!

Although some people leave out commas in sentences such as the above, doing so may sometimes confuse the reader:

If you cook your parents-in-law will be impressed.

If you cook, your parents-in-law will be impressed.

If the first sentence made you backtrack and read it again, it's probably because you understood the first part of the sentence to mean

'if you cook your parents-in-law', before realising that that couldn't be the intended meaning! As we can see, the comma in the second sentence makes it much clearer.

Interruptions

We also use commas to mark off interruptions, such as when a writer wants to insert a comment or an afterthought (underlined below):

Joel is, I'm sure, the best person for the job.

Lijun was, if I remember correctly, the last person to leave.

If we remove these interruptions, the sentences would still read smoothly: *Joel is the best person for the job; Lijun was the last person to leave.* Hence, the commas help to mark the beginnings and ends of strings of words (i.e. *I'm sure* and *if I remember correctly*) that provide additional information but aren't crucial to the sentence. Be sure to use two commas in such instances.

Relative clauses

Let's now look at relative clauses, which are like mini sentences beginning with words such as *who*, *which* and *that*. In the two sentences below, the relative clauses have been underlined:

a) *Our colleagues who keep stealing food from the fridge are not to be trusted.*

b) *Our colleagues, who keep stealing food from the fridge, are not to be trusted.*

Although both sentences contain the same words, they mean different things because of how they're punctuated. Sentence a) means 'only those colleagues who steal food are not to be trusted' because the relative clause *who keep stealing food from the fridge* specifically identifies which colleagues we mean – hence it cannot be removed. By contrast, b) means 'we trust none of our colleagues because they *all* steal food': this is because the commas around the relative clause suggest that it is optional information that isn't essential in identifying the colleagues – hence it may be removed, leaving us with *Our colleagues are not to be trusted*.

Similarly, we can make a distinction between the sentences below:

a) *Catherine's son James wants to be a pilot.*

b) *Catherine's son, James, wants to be a pilot.*

In a), the absence of commas around *James* shows that it cannot be removed because it tells the reader which of Catherine's sons wants to be a pilot. By contrast, in b), the commas around *James* show that it is optional information, and this implies that Catherine has only one son (and, by the way, his name is James).

Lists or series

Another use of commas is to separate items in a list:

We ordered spaghetti, lasagna, chicken salad, and fish and chips from the new stall.

In the above sentence, we have a list of four items, with the first two commas separating the first three items. Although the last comma is not compulsory, it is sometimes used to make

sentences clearer: here, it marks *fish and chips* as a separate item. This type of comma – the last before the word *and* in a list of items – is known as a serial comma (because it is used in a series of items) or the *Oxford comma* (because it is favoured by Oxford University Press).

An Oxford or serial comma is also useful when there is a long list of items, or if the items contain more than one word:

The police kicked open the locked door, entered the premises, checked for booby traps, and scoured the apartment for clues.

Note that the comma after *traps* helps the reader to understand that a new item is starting. An Oxford comma can also be useful in sentences such as the following:

In the courtroom were the two convicts, a lawyer and a judge.

The above sentence can be understood in two ways. The first is that there were four people in the courtroom, and the second is that there were two convicts: a lawyer and a judge.

To avoid the second interpretation, an Oxford comma (before *and*) would have helped:

In the courtroom were the two convicts, a lawyer, and a judge.

Addressing people

Commas are also used when we greet or address someone as the commas indicate a pause:

Hello, Mani.

Please eat, Uncle.



Although we often leave out commas in greetings such as *Hello Mani*, doing the same for the other sentence would make it seem like an invitation to commit cannibalism (i.e. *Please eat Uncle*). Hence, remember to use the comma in sentences such as *Please eat, Uncle*.

Whereas we should use a comma in greetings such as *Hello, John* when we write e-mail

messages or letters, this does not apply to *Dear John* because the word *dear* is an adjective (and not a greeting such as *hi* or *hello*) – and this is also why we don't write 'difficult, choice' or 'special, thanks'.

■ SEMICOLON (;)

A semicolon is somewhere in between a comma and a full stop: it is normally used to connect two related ideas when a full stop would be too strong a break, and a comma would be too weak (or even incorrect), as the following sentences show:

- a) *Maria washed her new car for the first time yesterday. It took her three hours.*

Junhao loves coffee. However, it gives him headaches.

- b) *Maria washed her new car for the first time yesterday; it took her three hours.*

Junhao loves coffee; however, it gives him headaches.

Although there is no difference in meaning between the two examples above, the full stops in the first pair a) create a slightly choppy effect, whereas in the second pair b), the semicolons create a gentler break and suggests that what comes after the semicolon is closely related to the first part of the sentence.

Some writers would simply use a comma between the clauses, as follows:

Maria washed her new car for the first time yesterday, it took her three hours.

Junhao loves coffee, however, it gives him headaches.

Some grammarians, however, say that it is not correct to use a comma to join clauses that are independent (capable of standing on their own). This use of a comma – called ‘comma splice’ – may be common in informal messages, but should be avoided in formal writing.

■ APOSTROPHE (')

Contractions

Apostrophes are often used in contractions, which are abbreviated words or expressions. In the examples below, a contraction apostrophe takes the place of letters or numerals that have been left out (as underlined below):

it's = it is; it has

let's = let us

they've = they have

doesn't = does not

you're = you are

fish 'n' chips = fish and chips

Class of '25 = Class of 2025

Note that when a contraction apostrophe appears at the beginning, it should curve to the left rather than the right: '21, not '21; 'tis, not 'tis; 'n', not 'n'.

Possessives

We use an apostrophe + s or just an apostrophe to show possession:

Siti's laptop = laptop belonging to Siti

the boys' mother = the mother of the boys

When we want to show that two or more parties share possession of something, the apostrophe goes after the second or last name (see a) below). But if the possession is not shared, we use an apostrophe after each name (see b) below):

a) *Andy and Cheryl's account* = account belonging to Andy and Cheryl

b) *Andy's and Paula's accounts* = Andy's account(s) and Paula's account(s)

Names ending in s

When a name ends in s, there are two ways to show the possessive form:

a) add an apostrophe: *Charles'*
Frances' Iris' James'

- b) add an apostrophe + s: *Charles's*
Frances's *Iris's* *James's*

In Singapore, the preference is to add only an apostrophe as in the examples in a), but many speakers of other varieties of English prefer b), especially when the possessive form ends up having an extra syllable in the pronunciation (e.g. 'Charleses', 'Franceses'). Whichever convention you wish to follow, remember that it is always good to be consistent.

■ **HYPHEN (-)**

Typically, hyphens are used to join two or more words together, for example:

- a. *Dr Aishah is a well-known vet.*
- b. *Ramesh's eighty-year-old father is the best cook I know.*
- c. *That two-metre-wide table takes up too much space in the sitting room.*

The hyphens show that the descriptions go together as a unit, so, for example, the hyphens in *eighty-year-old* join three words together to describe the noun *cook*.

However, if the description comes after the noun, hyphens are not needed:

- a. *Dr Aishah is a vet who is well known.*
- b. *Ramesh's father is eighty years old.*
- c. *That table is two metres wide.*

■ QUOTATION MARKS (` ' or " ")

There are two types of quotation or quote marks: single ` ' and double " ". There is no difference in meaning between them, but BrE users prefer single quotation marks while AmE users prefer double quotation marks:

- a. *Susan described Julie's dress sense as 'interesting'. (BrE)*
- b. *Susan described Julie's dress sense as "interesting." (AmE)*

When a quote appears inside a quote (what is called a 'nested quote'), the opposite happens, i.e. BrE uses double quotation marks, while AmE uses single quotation marks:

- a. *Julie said, 'Susan says my dress sense is "interesting", but I don't know whether she means it as a compliment'.* (BrE)
- b. *Julie said, "Susan says my dress sense is 'interesting,' but I don't know whether she means it as a compliment."* (AmE)

In Singapore, there seems to be a preference for double quotation marks for complete quotes and single quotation marks for short quotes. But whether you choose to use single or double quotation marks, remember to be consistent.

Finally, note that quotation marks should not be used for emphasis. Compare a) and b) below:

- a. *Ring us for a SPECIAL price.*
- b. *Ring us for a 'special' price.*

In a), capitalising the entire word *special* puts emphasis on the word, whereas in b), the

quotation marks suggest the meaning of a 'so-called special', which will make the reader suspicious about the deal. Other ways of emphasising a word include underlining, or using italics or boldface: special price; *special* price; **special** price.

■ RESOURCES

For more resources about punctuation, visit:



Sussex



Student.unsw



Grammarly



owl.purdue

Resource locations correct at time of print.

■ CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we've seen how punctuation plays an important role in communicating the meaning of our sentences accurately. We hope that you've found the points covered interesting and useful, and will put some of these into practice the next time you're writing something!

CHAPTER

5

Conclusion



We've now reached the end of this booklet!

We began by exploring the use of online language tools such as dictionaries, grammar websites and grammar checkers, and proceeded to examine some key differences between Singapore English, British English and American English. We also discussed some ways of writing more clearly and accurately, and surveyed the main punctuation marks, discussing how they may be able to convey differences in meaning.

Generative AI tools can now do many of the writing tasks we ask of them, and grammar checkers and AI tools are useful in pointing out our errors and in refining our writing. However, they may not always be sensitive to the purpose and context of our writing, and will not know the audience we are writing for. So, it is still necessary for us to keep honing our language skills so that we're able to say what we wish to say, the way we want to be understood.

We hope you've found the information in these chapters interesting and useful.

Happy writing!

Illustrations by Quek Hong Shin.

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Good English helps Singaporeans connect with people across borders and cultures. That's why the Speak Good English Movement encourages the use of Standard English in everyday conversations.

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