English Tutors’ Wish List

As shown by Sinclair (2011), knowledge of English ‘grammar’ and ‘punctuation’ is required to ensure academic success. This is particularly true for students who wish to make a career out of writing. For an author such knowledge enables them to refine their work.

The research of Sinclair (2011) shows that many Open University tutors dislike it when students:

1. Use apostrophes wrongly
2. Confuse common words; for example, there with their
3. Make spelling errors
4. Use informal language
5. Write sentences without verbs
6. Make every sentence a paragraph
7. Don’t use paragraphs
8. Write long convoluted sentences
9. Try to write too pompously
10. Use run-on sentences and comma splices (Sinclair, 2011, p3-4)

Tutors in the English Department have requested this fact sheet to highlight the particular grammatical and punctuation errors which they regard as weakening students’ work.

1. Subject verb agreement
2. Possessive apostrophe - either misused or omitted
3. Description rather than analysis
4. Poor referencing and following of referencing style such as, italicising book titles
5. No punctuation or acknowledgement of it
6. No understanding of sentence structure or clauses
7. Stringing sentences together for example with commas and comma splices

1. Subject/Verb agreement

There are certain circumstances when subject verb agreement can become problematic and sentences can become disjointed. Please see section 6 of this fact sheet for an example of ‘subject’ and ‘verb’.

a. A plural subject with a singular verb

Which of the two sentences below is correct?

Planning, writing style and structure is important to achieve a good grade. X

Planning, writing style and structure are important to achieve a good grade. Correct

Planning, writing style and structure are the subjects of the sentence. As the subject is plural the verb has to be are rather than is.

Take care when the subject is a list especially if the final item in the list is singular.

For example: Apples, bananas, grapes and a melon are examples of fruit.
b. A singular subject with a plural verb

Which of the two sentences below is correct?

The library’s collection of books was rearranged. Correct
The library’s collection of books were rearranged. X

The library’s collection is singular therefore the verb is singular: was rather than were

Take care if the subject is a group which is singular and therefore needs a singular verb.

The group of students were in the Ember Lounge. X
The group of students was in the Ember Lounge. Correct
The team of players was thundering down the field. Correct
The team of players were thundering down the field. X

When writing ‘each’ this is singular and requires a singular verb.

Each of the students is examined. Correct
Each of the students are examined. X

Note that the word ‘none’ can be treated as both singular and plural.

None of the students writes clearly. Correct
None of the students write clearly. Correct
None of the students were tired. Correct
None of the students was tired. Correct

Neither and either can also cause problems as they are both singular and need singular verbs.

Neither of the students is going into the room. Correct
Neither of the students are going into the room. X
Either the first or the fourth assignment seems easiest. Correct
Either the first or the fourth assignment seem easiest. X

Beware when a phrase is written between the subject and the verb.

The student, as well as the tutor, is displaying work. Correct
The student, as well as the tutor, are displaying work. X
2. Possessive apostrophe

This is the only apostrophe used in academic writing and is the one which a lot of people find difficult to use. It is often used incorrectly or is omitted completely but this changes the meaning of a sentence quite considerably in some cases. This is the apostrophe which indicates ‘possession’ or ‘ownership’ of something. Remember that it’s means it is.

The apostrophe before an ‘s’

a) When a singular noun possesses/owns something

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jayne’s sister</th>
<th>The sister of Jayne</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The apostrophe’s use</td>
<td>The use of the apostrophe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student’s work</td>
<td>The work of a student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b) When an indefinite pronoun is possessive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nobody’s book</th>
<th>The book of nobody</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One’s son is a student</td>
<td>The son of one is a student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

c) When a plural noun possesses/owns something and does not end in an ‘s’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The women’s rights</th>
<th>The rights of women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The men’s room</td>
<td>The room belonging to the men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The children’s playground</td>
<td>The playground belonging to the children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The apostrophe after an ‘s’

d) When a plural noun ends in an ‘s’ is possessive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The sisters’ room</th>
<th>The room of the sisters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In three weeks’ time</td>
<td>In the time of three weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The candidates’ votes</td>
<td>The votes of the candidates</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

e) When a singular noun that ends in an ‘s’ is possessive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In Jesus’ name</th>
<th>In the name of Jesus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For goodness’ sake</td>
<td>For the sake of goodness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dickens’ novels</td>
<td>The novels of Dickens</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Armed with the above knowledge you now need to watch out for the use of the possessive apostrophe and carefully interpret the meaning of what you are reading and writing. Watch out for incorrect usage such as in plurals: The cats eye’s are green; the beer bottle’s are empty. (Both of these sentences are incorrect. Can you say why?) Think about the Waterstone’s bookshop debate ... or as it will be called Waterstones!
3. Description rather than analysis

To achieve at university you need to apply critical thinking. A child can read a book and describe what it says. What your tutor requires is that you use what you have read to put forward an argument. You need to validate your opinions using the information you have read when researching your topic.

Definition: Critical

People often interpret the word ‘critical’ and ‘criticism’ to mean being negative about an issue. For university work, the alternative meaning of ‘making a careful judgement after a balanced consideration of all aspects of a topic’ is the one you should adopt.

McMillan & Weyers (2011, p. 77):

To achieve critical thinking you need to have an all-round view of the topic backed up by evidence from your research. You constantly need to ensure that you have shown your tutor how you know that what you are putting forward is true, therefore, the greater the weight of evidence the better. Sometimes if evidence is not available you need to state this and you may need to alter your opinion in the light of it. However, if you have not learnt to research in depth, your tutor may point you in the direction of further reading.

When dealing with fiction or plays, you need to look for evidence within the book or play that you feel demonstrates your view. Have a look at the ‘Critical Thinking’ fact sheet.

4. Poor referencing and following of referencing style

The university guidelines on Harvard referencing can be found in ‘Refzone’. This is found on ‘The Library’ page of the university website under ‘Improve Your Study Skills’. It is located in the ‘Resources’ column and the web address is - http://www.staffs.ac.uk/support_depts/infoservices/learning_support/refzone/.

In order to satisfy your tutors’ requirements you should follow the Harvard guidelines precisely and consistently. Presentation is important and if you do not follow guidelines it can be taken as a sign of a poor attitude and laziness. See the ‘Plagiarism and Referencing’ fact sheet.

You may also be interested to learn how to use ‘Refworks’ which is an online bibliographic management tool. This is also located in the in the same section of ‘The Library’ page under ‘Essential Tools’. The web address is - http://www.staffs.ac.uk/support_depts/infoservices/learning_support/refworks/.

Use our ‘Refworks Quick Guide’ fact sheet which will help you to understand how this tool works.

5. No punctuation or acknowledgement of it

At university grammar and punctuation are important as they ensure that the meaning of your writing is clear. University is all about independent learning therefore if you have a weakness in this area you need to address it yourself. If punctuation presents a problem for you, you should acknowledge this and do something about it. The book by Sinclair (2011), referred to below, is written specifically for university students. If you are using websites to support your learning make sure they are academic ones and look for the ‘.ac.uk’ in the web address. Take a look at the ‘Punctuation’ fact sheet too.

6. No understanding of sentence structure or clauses

Every sentence requires a subject and a verb; however, subjects and verbs also appear in clauses which are groups of words which may not be complete sentences.

The book is well used. With ‘book’ as the subject and ‘is’ the verb.
There are independent, otherwise known as main, clauses and dependent or subordinate clauses. An independent clause stands on its own and can be a complete simple sentence for example:

I like to work at night.

A dependent clause does not make complete sense on its own such as:

If at first you don’t succeed...

Compound sentences are made up of two or more main clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction such as: ‘and’, ‘or’, ‘but’, ‘for’, ‘yet’ or ‘so’.

I like to work at night but some students like to study earlier in the day

A complex sentence contains an independent clause and one or more dependent clauses as well as a subordinating conjunction such as: after, when, because, since and although; or a relative pronoun like: who, which, or that. It is important to ensure that you punctuate correctly in a complex sentence.

I worked in the morning because we were going to the cinema in the evening. (No comma)

Because we were going to the cinema in the evening, I worked in the morning. (Comma)

Using dependent clauses allows writers to vary the pace and rhythm of their writing and to indicate the relative importance of different ideas.

As a writer you need to familiarise yourself with sentence structure. There is plenty of support available online but ensure that you are using a reliable academic source. Some of the websites provided below may help you.

7. Stringing sentences together

This occurs when a comma is used to connect two independent clauses. You need to be able to recognise this and correct it. An example of a comma splice:

Kerry likes studying, Dave works with Kerry.

Correction can be done by using a full stop, a semi colon or a conjunction.

a) Use a full stop

Kerry likes studying. Dave works with Kerry.

b) Use a semi colon

Kerry likes studying; Dave works with Kerry.

c) Use a subordinating conjunction (because, when, since, although...)

Because Kerry likes studying, Dave works with Kerry.

d) Use a coordinating conjunction (and, but, for, or, yet, so...)

Kerry likes studying, so Dave works with Kerry.

e) Use a semi colon and a conjunctive adverb (then, therefore, however...)

Kerry likes studying; therefore Dave works with Kerry.
References/Further reading


For an appointment or further advice:

Phone: 01785 353500
Email: studyskills@staffs.ac.uk
Visit: Skills Spaces: Thompson Library, Stoke OR Octagon Library, Stafford

Additional resources are available the website at: http://libguides.staffs.ac.uk/AcademicSkills
Please note that any information provided by the ASK team is advisory only. No liability will be attached to the University, its employees or agents for any loss or detriment suffered by a student relying on the advice given.