

Unit 2: Word Choice and Grammar

Punctuation and sentence structure errors (covered in Unit 1) account for a large proportion of grammatical errors. Other errors include subject-verb agreement, incorrect position of words within a sentence, and confusion with participles. Errors in word use may be related to grammar, but they may also be caused by incorrect spelling or confused meaning. All these areas of language use will be covered in this unit.

Please be aware that in some cases there is a difference between British English spelling and US English spelling.

1. Commonly confused words

Complimentary/complementary

Examples:

At the start of the course all students receive a complimentary CD-ROM.

‘Complimentary’ means to be given free of charge.

The authors examined home activities that were school-like, complementary to school, or unrelated to school.

‘Complementary’ means to combine well.

Comprise/compose

Examples:

The Commonwealth comprises 1.7 billion people in nations that were formerly part of Great Britain’s colonial empire.

‘Comprise’ means to consist of, to be made up of. Do not say ‘comprise of’. If unsure, then use ‘include’ or ‘consist of’ instead.

Indonesia is the world’s largest archipelago and is composed of over 18,000 islands.

‘Compose’ means to make up, to form. It is usually used with ‘of’, and is usually used in the passive form (e.g. is/are composed of, was/were composed of).

Continual/continuous

Examples:

Continual interruptions distract students when they are writing.

‘Continual’ means often repeated.

Among those surveyed the length of continuous periods of employment varied enormously.

‘Continuous’ means uninterrupted/unbroken.

Dependant/dependent

Examples:

Details have yet to be finalised concerning postgraduate students with dependants.

‘Dependant’ is a noun which refers to a person who depends on someone else.

*The discrepancy between poor independent states and rich dependent states is clear from the difference in **per capita** income.*

‘Dependent’ is an adjective which describes one thing which depends on another.

Discrete/discreet

Examples:

The commonly held image is that Chad is populated by discrete ethnic groups who live in isolation from each other.

‘Discrete’ means separate.

The university offers a discreet counselling service to students in an environment that is friendly and informal.

‘Discreet’ means maintaining silence or respecting privacy.

Effect/affect

Examples:

Global warming affects many different facets of life on Earth.

‘Affect’ is a verb (‘to affect’).

The main effect of global warming is an increasing global average temperature.

‘Effect’ is a noun and is generally preceded by an article ‘an’ or ‘the’.

(However, ‘effect’ can sometimes be a verb with the meaning of ‘to make something happen’ and commonly accompanies the word ‘change’ e.g. *These same factors effected a change in the ancestral rituals of the Amami islands.*)

Imply/infer

Examples:

The supervisor implied that the student’s standard of writing was not good enough.

‘Imply’ means to express something indirectly.

It is interesting to note that negatives work both ways: if a cat is not a dog, it can be inferred that a dog is not a cat.

‘Infer’ means to arrive at a conclusion by reasoning from evidence.

Less/fewer

Examples:

Early parish records in Scotland generally contain less information than those in England.

‘Less’ is used with uncountable nouns

As a result of these barriers, fewer buildings are as energy efficient as they should be.

‘Fewer’ is used with countable nouns.

Passed/past

Examples:

When Alexander the Great passed through Bukhara, it was already about 1000 years old.

‘Passed’ means to move in a particular direction or to a particular place/position. Or it can signify being successful in some kind of test.

In the past, a substantial number of archaeological excavations were staffed by volunteers.

‘Past’ means belonging to an earlier time

Practice/practise

Examples:

PhD students need to practise their presentation skills before their viva.

‘Practise’ is a verb (‘to practise’).

The restrictions imposed on students made the practice of ethnography all but impossible.

‘Practice’ is a noun and is therefore often used after an article ‘an’ or ‘the’, or an adjective.

Principle/principal

Examples:

One of the principal aims of a lecturer is to provide an environment in which students are helped to ‘learn for themselves’ rather than be taught.

‘Principal’ is an adjective (describing a noun) which means main or most important. It can also be a noun which means the head of a college or university.

One of the hallmarks of universities is the principle of academic freedom, namely the freedom to engage in research of one’s own choosing and freely to publish one’s findings.

‘Principle’ is a noun which means a basic belief, theory or rule.

Raise/rise

Examples:

Capital flows as trade barriers are raised and lowered depending on the economic health of the states involved.

‘Raise’ means to increase/push up. A human agent is needed. It is a transitive verb and someone is doing the action of increasing. When it is used in the passive, as here, the human agent is often not mentioned.

Most commentators agree that the trade deficit will stabilise as import prices rise.

‘Rise’ means to go up/increase. A human agent is not needed. This is an intransitive verb and so it cannot be followed by an indirect object. It cannot be used in the passive form.

Stationary/stationery

Examples:

Aristotle thought the earth was stationary and that the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars moved in circular orbits about the earth.

‘Stationary’ means standing still/not moving.

Overhead transparencies and coloured pens are kept in the departmental stationery cupboard.

‘Stationery’ refers to pens, paper etc.

There/their

Examples:

The households surveyed operate dozens of non-agricultural businesses on their farms.

‘Their’ is used to indicate possession, i.e. if something belongs to someone or something.

There are a number of variables that may affect the proportion of income earned from agriculture.

‘There’ is used to indicate the existence of something.

Varying/various

Examples:

Drawing valid generalisations from research studies conducted under varying conditions is a challenging task.

‘Varying conditions’ implies the individually changing conditions of the same variable(s).

A further twenty-three projects will be funded from various sources in 2006/2007.

‘Various sources’ implies that the sources are different from each other.

Participation in seminar discussions can be greatly improved by varying both the composition of the student groups and the physical layout of the seminar room.

‘Varying’ can also be a verb.

2. Subject-verb agreement

i) If the subject of the sentence is singular, the verb must be in singular form. If the subject is plural, the verb must be in plural form.

Example:

The experience of living overseas and learning the language and customs of other countries are of great benefit to international students.

This is **incorrect**. The subject is 'experience' and not 'customs/countries' and so the verb should be 'is'.

ii) One source of confusion arises with the word 'each'. 'Each' is singular and should always be followed by a singular verb. However, 'each' is often separated from its verb by a prepositional phrase ending in a plural noun e.g. 'Each of the students'. Many people assume that the following verb should be 'are', but this would be **incorrect**. The **correct** verb would be 'is'.

Example:

Each of the students is expected to complete this Unit before continuing to the next one.

'Each' is singular which requires a singular verb.

The following words are also always singular and so need a singular verb:

'anyone', 'anybody', 'every', 'everyone', 'someone', 'somebody', 'no-one', 'nobody', 'neither', 'either'.

iii) When fractions, percentages and the words 'all', 'more', 'most', 'some' and 'part' are followed by an 'of' phrase, the number of the subject is determined by the number of the word following the 'of'. A single (or uncountable) noun has a singular verb, and a plural noun has a plural verb.

Examples:

Two thirds of the student's discussion was irrelevant.

'Discussion' is singular, so the verb is singular.

According to e-mail monitoring firm eLabs Inc. (2006), approximately half of all e-mails sent in April of this year were spam.

'E-mails' is plural, so the verb is plural.

3. Position of 'such as'

'Such as' must be positioned next to the word to which it is referring. If it is placed in a different position in the sentence, it can cause confusion for the reader.

Examples:

Some common terms are defined because they are often used in different contexts, such as 'title' or 'format'.

This is confusing. 'Title' and 'format' are examples of terms, not examples of contexts. Therefore, they must be placed next to terms.

Some common terms, such as 'title' or 'format', are defined because they are often used in different contexts.

This is **correct**.

4. Prepositions at the end

Although it is common in spoken English to place prepositions at the end of a sentence, in written English it is considered **incorrect** to end a sentence with a preposition (words such as 'to', 'in', 'of', 'from').

Example:

It is difficult for members of a society to evaluate issues associated with race, given the limited information which such evaluations are made from.

This is **incorrect** in academic writing. The following sentence is **correct**.

Example:

It is difficult for members of a society to evaluate issues associated with race, given the limited information from which such evaluations are made.

5. Confusing participles (*ing* forms)

A participle (an '*ing*' word) which is not preceded by a noun in a sentence will take the first noun following the comma as its subject, whether or not that is what you intend. So you need to ensure that the subject is the same for the main verb and the introductory '*ing*' word (participle)

Example:

After struggling through several chapters of dense academic text, the reward for the reader is a deeper understanding of contract law.

The only subject in this sentence is 'reward'. This sentence, therefore, means that the 'reward' has struggled through the text.

This sentence could be corrected in the following ways:

After struggling through several chapters of dense academic text, the reader achieves a deeper understanding of contract law.

Or: change the verb to a passive form:

After struggling through several chapters of dense academic text, the reader is rewarded by a deeper understanding of contract law.