

# Grammar and style

The following material provides advice for you as a university student with regard to English usage. Even if you feel your use of the English language is competent, it is still recommended that you read through the following.

## Sentences

A sentence is a group of words that expresses a complete thought. A sentence is marked by an initial capital letter and generally by a final full stop.

A sentence must contain as its most basic two elements, a subject and a verb.

Example: *Rivers* (subject) *flow* (verb).

## Verbs

A verb is a word or words that express an action or a physical or mental state. Verbs can be a single word, but are often a group of words.

Example: *Water* (subject) *is* (verb) *scarce*.

## Subject

The person or thing that is identified as doing the action or expressing the state is the subject of the verb. The subject is generally a **noun**. A noun is a word used to name people, ideas, things, qualities and states.

Example: *rivers, water*

Sentences can be very basic or very detailed and are mostly more complicated than the examples above. In this course you are encouraged to use the following sentence structure.

Subject + **verb** + rest of the sentence

.....**To be changed by lecturer if desired**

*Environmental costs **will be born** by future generations.*

*Billions of people **lack** adequate sanitation.*

*Most industrialised countries **are** welfare states.*

*The level of government support **varies** according to a person's current circumstances.*

## Sentence length

Regardless of their structure, it is important that you do not allow your sentences to become too long. While there is no rule about acceptable sentence length, the following points are useful to keep in mind:

- each sentence should focus on one idea
- the sentence should be concise and clear in presenting that idea
- the likelihood of grammar errors increases with sentence complexity and length
- readability decreases with excessive length and complexity.



### Activity 1

Write sentences using the following words in the subject + verb + rest of the sentence pattern

.....**To be changed by lecturer if desired**

Use 'pollution' as the subject.

Use 'provide' as the verb.

Use 'greater opportunities for employment' as the rest of the sentence.

Now write two sentences following this pattern using words from this course.

## First, second and third person

Your lecturers at university will ask you not to use the first person for the majority of your assignments. Writing in first person involves use of personal pronouns: I, me, my, mine, we, us, our. It is the type of language used socially. There are exceptions to this rule so you should always check with your lecturer, particularly if you feel that an assignment requires you to use 'I'. The reason lecturers ask you to avoid the first person is because they do not want you to give your personal opinion but instead to base what you say or write upon academically credible research.

You will also generally be asked to avoid using second person. Writing in second person involves use of the pronouns: you, your, yours.

Academic writing generally uses what is called **third person**. Third person pronouns are: they, their, it, its.

### Example:

*The organisations represented at the summit agreed that their course of action should be to actively endorse sustainable development.*

*The government believes its policy will promote increased employment.*

## Ways to avoid first and second person structures

### **Rather than writing in the first person:**

*I conducted research on the World Bank's policies.*

### **consider writing in the third person:**

*Research was conducted on the World Bank's policies.*

### **Rather than writing in the first person:**

*our earth*

*our oceans*

### **consider writing:**

*the earth*

*the oceans*

### **Rather than writing in the first person:**

*our society*

*our community*

### **consider writing:**

*Australian society or global society*

*the Australian community or the local community or the Brisbane community.*

### **Rather than writing in the second person:**

*You can find convincing arguments for the need to promote full employment.*

### **consider writing in the third person:**

*Scholars have made convincing arguments for the need to promote full employment.*



## Activity 2

Rewrite the following sentences to remove all use of first and second person.

.....**To be changed by lecturer if desired**

1. We will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of introducing a carbon tax.
2. You need to recycle your household waste.
3. The development of sustainable industries is something I believe our government should be researching.

## Subject/verb/pronoun agreement

### Subject/verb agreement

The subject and its verb must agree in both number and person. This means that if one singular subject is used, a singular verb must also be used. If a plural subject is used then the **verb** must also be plural.

Singular

*The household **contains** five people.*

### Plural

Developed countries **use** large amounts of energy.

This can be confusing when the subject contains a group of words. There are some examples of correct matching below. Notice that the subject focuses on the noun that incorporates the whole group of words. The main noun in the subject has been underlined and the verb is in bold.

*A group (singular) of environmentalists **is protesting** (singular) outside parliament house.  
Various sections (plural) of the department at the university **are meeting** (plural) to discuss a policy on employment creation.  
The United States of America (singular) **is** (singular) a proponent of free trade.*

### Pronoun/noun agreement

This idea of matching extends also to the use of pronouns where the subject and its pronoun must match in person. There is an explanation of what 'person' means in the previous section.

**Pronouns:** A pronoun is a word that replaces a noun which saves repetition of names and ideas.

Pronouns referring to the sender/writer (*I, me, my, we, us, our*) and pronouns referring to the reader/receiver (*you, your*) are rarely used in academic writing.

Pronouns that refer to subjects other than the writer/sender or reader/receiver are the ones used in academic writing (*he, she, him, her, his, they, them, their, it, its*).

The examples below show the subject matching with both the **verb** and the pronoun.

*An activist (singular) **shows** (singular) his/her (singular) support for a cause.  
Activists (plural) **show** (plural) their (plural) support for a cause.*



### Activity 3

Select the correct word from the alternatives in each sentence.

.....**To be adapted by lecturer if desired**

1. The principles of sustainable development **is/are** controversial.
2. The change in government policies **appears/appear** to encourage job growth.
3. The type of models of sustainable development presented **was/were** inappropriate for developing countries.

Fill in the gaps in the following sentences. Choose from the list of words below.

he, they, her, it, she, their, his, its

4. The Greens can influence government policy. In the Senate \_\_\_\_\_ can promote \_\_\_\_\_ agenda by threatening to block legislation.
5. The leader of the party reaffirmed \_\_\_\_\_ support for the Kyoto agreement.
6. In order to receive a government benefit, a recipient is required to meet the principles of mutual obligation. \_\_\_\_\_ must also regularly meet with the

case manager.

## Run-on sentences

Students sometimes write sentences that run on and on without any punctuation or without the correct punctuation. These are called run-on sentences. The information that is added on to the original sentence has not been properly connected.

The sentence below is a run-on sentence. It has two separate statements that need to be either completely divided or combined in a clear and correct way.

*The lecture was interesting its topic was marine ecosystems.*

Here are three possible solutions.

*The lecture was interesting. Its topic was marine ecosystems.*

*The lecture was interesting because its topic was marine ecosystems.*

*The lecture on marine technology was interesting.*



## Activity 4

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Correct any run-on sentences in the following.

1. Politics is about more than what governments do, also it is individuals' actions in society.
2. Water is needed in large amounts in arid lands, it is needed for consumption and agriculture.
3. The baby boomers were born between 1946 to 1964 and they will be a major drain on natural resources in a few years time because they will be ready to retire but will not have sufficient savings to self-fund.

## Sentence fragments

Sentence fragments are not complete sentences. They do not express a complete thought and cannot stand alone. The example below has one complete sentence and two fragments.

*The practice is common in the press in the USA and a significant part of Europe. Not common in the rest of the world. And not at all popular in Australia.*

The fragments need to be made into sentences in a way that does not lose the original meaning.

*The practice is common in the press in the USA and a significant part of Europe **but not** in the rest of the world. It is not popular at all in Australia.*

Here is another example. The second part is a sentence fragment.

*The environmentalists continued their research. Despite the cuts in funding.*

Here are two ways to correct this error:

*The environmentalists continued their research. They did this despite the cuts in funding.*

*The environmentalists continued with their research despite the cuts in funding.*



## Activity 5

Make complete sentences from the following sentences and sentence fragments.

1. Economic activities need a healthy environment. Such as agriculture, forestry and tourism.
2. Welfare payments provide a safety net for people who do not have a job. But not enough to live on.
3. Climate change creates many problems. The unpredictability of the weather. The flooding of low-lying ground.

## Punctuation

Below we will discuss the use of capital letters, the full stop and the apostrophe. There are other punctuation marks but these are commonly used in academic writing.

### Capital letters

Capital letters perform particular functions and should be used only in the correct places. The following list gives the important situations where they must be used.

#### Beginning a sentence

*All counties need to develop a policy on water usage. The policy must also deal with water storage.*

#### Names of days of the week, months

*There was an Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992.*

#### Names of people, countries, organisations, conferences

*Kofi Annan who comes from Ghana is the Secretary-General of the United Nations.*

### Full stops

These are used at the completion of a sentence.

*The information on pollution was passed on to the appropriate government department.*

### Apostrophes

When a letter or letters are omitted from a word, the shortened form (e.g. can't) is called a contraction. Contractions are used in everyday life. They are not acceptable in academic writing.

The main use of apostrophes in academic writing is to show possession. The general rule for making a noun possessive is to add an apostrophe (') plus -s for singular nouns, and an apostrophe after the -s for plural nouns ending in -s.

#### Singular nouns

An apostrophe plus -s is added to show possession (or ownership).

*the prime minister's decision*

#### Plural nouns

Plural nouns ending in -s have the possessive apostrophe placed after the -s.

*ministers' portfolios*

Some nouns do not add –s or –es to make a plural, for example, children, men, women. They add an apostrophe before the –s just like singular nouns.

*Aboriginal children's corroboree*

### Apostrophes and 'it'

The word its is a special case. When using the word its to show possession, no apostrophe is used.

*This organisation has a well known welfare supporter as its president.*

*The meeting will be held at 2.00pm. Marine pollution in local fishing areas is an important item on its agenda.*

### Using it + s to show omission

With the word its, the apostrophe is used only in the contraction of it is and it has.

*It's (it is) an important piece of research on pollution.*

This is not used in academic writing as it is a contraction.



## Activity 6

Punctuate the following.

1. the aboriginal communities concerns about job creation were addressed by the governments minister
2. there is a need for all australian states delegates to discuss water conservation in the murray/darling system
3. representatives from the government department and its agencies will meet in sydney in october with delegates from europe to discuss pollution in inland rivers

## Spelling and vocabulary

### Using a spell-checker

Most students today use computers to write their assignments. Computers generally have a spell checker installed. At university, the spell checker is the most accepted and widely used guide for spelling correction.

It is essential to use the spell checker in the writing of all assignments. This will pick up your spelling errors, although it may be set on American spelling. Refer to your word processor's help files in order to change your dictionary setting to Australian English.

The spell checker as its name suggests, deals only with spelling. It cannot confirm whether or not you have chosen the right word. See the section on Proof Reading for a further discussion of this issue.

### Improving your spelling

Faculties or discipline areas at university have a vocabulary that is specific or peculiar to that particular field of study and research. Your lecturer will expect you to be able to spell important terms correctly. In this situation, a list of words you find difficult is particularly useful. Keep it on hand so that you can check the words you are unsure of.

### Dictionaries

With the arrival of the spell checker, the dictionary is now more important in reading than in writing. If you are not sure of the meaning of a word, you need to check it in the dictionary. However when you are reading and find an unfamiliar word, avoid turning immediately to the dictionary. It is usually better to skim over the unknown word, continue reading and see if you can discover its meaning from the context of the reading. Refer to the dictionary afterwards, as it is important to feel comfortable with words that are new to you. You can then use these words yourself with confidence.

### Proof reading

When your assignment is complete you need to review or edit it. This should detect errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar. The issues below in Things to check have all been covered in this material.

### Things to check

- Check that your sentences have a subject and a verb.
- Check that the sentence means what you want it to mean.
- Check that you have written in sentences with capital letters and full stops.
- Make sure you have written in third person and not first or second.
- Make sure your subject matches its verb and any pronouns used.
- Check you have no run-on sentences.
- Check you have no sentence fragments.
- Check your use of apostrophes.

### Additional special proof reading issues

#### Homonyms

These are words that sound the same when spoken but are spelt differently. They include words like: *their* and *there*, *see* and *sea*, *practice* and *practise*, *effect* and *affect*.

You will need to check these words carefully. You may need to use your dictionary.

#### Use of the word *being*

The word *being* is not a verb when used alone. It is used to introduce a phrase.

*The politician being concerned with children's welfare.*  
is not a complete sentence.

*Being concerned with children's welfare, the politician opposed the reduction in welfare payments to families.*

This is a complete sentence, however because of the potential for error and because it does not follow the structure or pattern recommended in this material of subject + verb + rest of sentence, it is generally better to restructure the sentence and omit the word *being*.

*The politician opposed the reduction in welfare payments to families because he was concerned with children's welfare.*

### Informal/colloquial language

Academic writing is objective and formal and not emotive. This has been discussed under the use of first, second and third person earlier. The words we use everyday in face to face conversation, on the phone, and in emails and text messages to friends are often inappropriate in formal communications such as assignments. One of the reasons for this is that these words can be misunderstood because they are used by a particular group or culture. For this reason, colloquial expressions should not be used in assignments at university.

It can be hard to check this as many common colloquialisms are now more widely used. Journalism today for example uses informal terms quite commonly in daily newspapers and on television news. The following activity is designed to help you be able to identify such words.



### Activity 7

Identify the colloquialisms and informal language in the following passage:

.....**To be adapted by lecturer if desired**

The nature of journalism today has changed. Television journalism in particular has taken a great leap forward with technological innovation. It has been recognised that the material presented has a massive influence on people's opinions. Journalists keep us informed about current issues and put under the spotlight the ones they see as important. Many commentators, however, have criticised the media for following their own agenda and putting their own spin on events. They suggest that some journalists seem be out to prove a point. These commentators believe that the media should be more objective so that the general public does not have to see each issue through the media's eyes.

Now rewrite the passage using only formal objective language.

### Keep it simple

While it is important not to use informal language, it is equally important that as students you do not try to incorporate into your work words that you are unfamiliar with. There is no advantage to you in including words that you have plucked from a dictionary, thesaurus or text book unless you are confident of using them correctly. Your assignment needs to flow logically and the insertion of unfamiliar words will inhibit its natural flow. Keep your language simple and accurate. This minimises errors and makes it easier for your lecturer to read and understand.

## Answers to activities

### Activity 2: First and second person

1. The group will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of introducing a carbon tax.
2. All people need to recycle their household waste.
3. The development of sustainable industries is something that all governments should be researching.

### Activity 3: Subject/verb/pronoun agreement

1. The principles of sustainable development **are** controversial.
2. The change in government policies **appears** to encourage job growth.
3. The type of models of sustainable development presented **was** inappropriate for developing countries.
4. The Greens can influence government policy. In the Senate **they** can promote **their** agenda by threatening to block legislation.
5. The leader of the party reaffirmed **his/her** support for the Kyoto agreement.
6. In order to receive a government benefit, a recipient is required to meet the principles of mutual obligation. **He/she** must also regularly meet with the case manager.

### Activity 4: Run-on sentences

1. Politics is about more than what governments do. **It is** also about individuals' actions in society.
2. Water is needed in large amounts in arid lands. **It is** needed for consumption and agriculture.
3. The baby boomers were born between 1946 to 1964. **They will** be a major drain on natural resource in a few years time. They will be ready to retire but many will not have sufficient savings to self-fund.

### Activity 5: Sentence fragments

1. Economic activities such as agriculture, forestry and tourism need a healthy environment.
2. Welfare payments provide a safety net for people who do not have a job. However, many welfare commentators claim that they are not enough to live on.
3. Climate change creates many problems. It means the weather is even more unpredictable and can cause problems like the flooding of low-lying ground.

## Activity 6: Punctuation

1. The Aboriginal communities' concerns about job creation were addressed by the government's minister.
2. There is a need for all Australian states' delegates to discuss water conservation in the Murray/Darling system.
3. Representatives from the government department and its agencies will meet in Sydney in October with delegates from Europe to discuss pollution in inland rivers.

## Activity 7: Colloquialisms and informal language

The colloquialisms and informal language have been underlined.

The nature of journalism today has changed. Television journalism in particular has taken a great leap forward with technological innovation. It has been recognised that the material presented has a massive influence on people's opinions. Journalists keep us informed about current issues and put under the spotlight the ones they see as important. Many commentators, however, have criticised the media for following their own agenda and putting their own spin on events. They suggest that some journalists seem to be out to prove a point. These commentators believe that the media should be more objective so that the general public does not have to see each issue thru the media's eyes.

