

GRAMMAR AND STYLE

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 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) can be (verb) very scarce in parts of Australia.

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 are nouns

Sentences can be very basic or very detailed and are mostly more complicated than the examples above. A simple sentence structure helps to make your writing clear. A simple sentence structure is:

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

Example:

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

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

Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments are not complete sentences. Often they do not contain a verb and cannot stand-alone.

Incorrect example: one complete sentence and one sentence fragment.

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.

Correct example:

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.

Incorrect example: one complete sentence and one sentence fragment.

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

Correct examples: two alternative ways to correct the above.

1. The environmentalists continued their research. They did this despite the cuts in funding.
2. The environmentalists continued with their research despite the cuts in funding.

Sentence length

Although there are no rules about sentence length, long, complex sentences can be difficult to read. Consider the following points when deciding on sentence length.

- 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.

First, second and third person

A pronoun is a word that replaces a noun to save repetition of names or ideas. Writing in first person involves use of personal pronouns: I, me, my, mine, we, us, our. Writing in second person involves use of personal pronouns: you, your, yours. In most university assignments you will be asked **not** to use the first or second person, because they require you to write based on academically credible research rather than your personal experience. 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.

If in doubt, check with your lecturer, as some assessment tasks (e.g., reflections and journals) will require a more personal approach.

Examine the ideas over the page about converting 1st or 2nd person to 3rd person.

First person	Third person
Our earth	The earth
Our society	Australian society
I conducted research on the World Bank's policies	Research was conducted on the World Bank's policies.
You can find convincing arguments for the need to promote full employment	Social researchers have made convincing arguments for the need to promote full employment

Subject/verb agreement

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

For example:

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 rather than a single noun. In the examples 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.

Pronoun/noun agreement

The subject of a sentence and its pronoun must match in person. Pronouns that refer to subjects other than the writer or reader are used frequently in academic writing (*he, she, him, her, his, they, them, their, it, its*).

Examples of matching subject to both verb and pronoun.

An activist (singular) **shows** (singular) his/her (singular) support for a cause.

Activists (plural) **show** (plural) their (plural) support for a cause.

PUNCTUATION

Two punctuation marks that cause concern and confusion are the colon and the semicolon

Colons :

A colon is used to (a) begin a short list or (b) to explain a point further.

Example (a): Personal pronouns include: I, me, mine, my, we, our, us

Example (b): Students are encouraged to use third person pronouns: they and their.

Semicolons ;

A semicolon is used (a) to link two ideas that are closely related where it can be replaced by a full stop. (b) A semicolon is also used to separate groups of words in a complex list that can also be long.

Example (a): Use third person; it restricts use of personal opinion.

Example (b): Successful study at university involves: following advice provided for you by your lecturer; seeking help when you feel you need it; and engaging with opportunities that allow you to meet with other students.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

While it is important not to use informal or colloquial language, it is equally important that you do use words you are unfamiliar with. Your assignment needs to flow logically and the insertion of unfamiliar words will restrict its natural flow. Keep your language simple and accurate; this minimises errors.

RESOURCES

- Other QUICK TIPS FOR STUDENTS especially YOUR ASSIGNMENT – THE FINAL CHECK
<http://www.usq.edu.au/learningcentre/tips.htm>
- Online resources
<http://www.usq.edu.au/learningcentre/alsonline/gramwrit/>
- Talk with a tutor at The Learning Centre (tlc@usq.edu.au)

The Learning Centre
T: +61 7 4631 2751
E: tlc@usq.edu.au
W: www.usq.edu.au/learnteach/learnsupp/

USQ UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND
fulfilling lives