

Critical Thinking

Being Critical

Another defining feature of academic writing is evidence of some critical thinking. Although being critical is one of the most difficult and elusive aspects of academic writing, it is a feature that can gain high rewards. Indeed, critiquing theories, arguments, and evidence often gains significant marks in assignments. It is important to be able to develop some critical thinking skills and to communicate these in your writing.

What Does “Being Critical” Really Mean?

Firstly, I would like to identify some concerns surrounding the practice of being critical.

1. It is common for those beginning their journey into academic writing to take the view that being critical is all about picking out the negative or weak aspects of a process or theory. This may lead to unnecessary feelings of tension when being assigned the task of criticising a system that may have many useful attributes.
2. Secondly, the practice of criticising something that has already been decided upon and implemented may seem futile because of the lack of short and long-term application.
3. Thirdly, being assigned the task of criticising the work of an esteemed author may appear to be an unreasonable demand because of the lack of knowledge and experience encountered by someone entering a discipline for the first time.
4. Finally, the fact that the author has had their work published means that whatever information they have written has already undergone a rigid process of change and evaluation, thereby rendering the student’s own criticisms as unnecessary and without substance, or application.

However, all of these criticisms fail to take into account the fundamental purpose of academic writing. The central task of academic writing is to demonstrate to the marker that you have thoroughly engaged with the ideas and interpretations of academic experts. This process is not (always) about reaching a definitive or absolute answer or conclusion to an issue. Rather, it is about joining in a broader academic debate about the pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages, or strengths and weaknesses surrounding a particular issue. In demonstrating that you have engaged with the literature, using a level of analysis that incorporates some degree of evaluation is an effective method for presenting your engagement with the literature. Being critical is at the heart of this high-powered analysis or evaluation. Indeed, evaluation is a useful way of understanding the work involved in being critical in your writing, even to the point of providing an apt synonym for the word “critical”.

In terms of addressing the original criticisms involved in being critical, mentioned in the first paragraph of this section, I would like to respond with the following points.

1. Firstly, even when you agree with a process, in which you are required to carry out some critical analysis on, you can still highlight how it could be improved upon, and in so doing, identify areas of weakness. Furthermore, being critical encompasses not only the identification of weaknesses, but also strengths. Indeed, pointing out the benefits and particular advantages of a system also demonstrates a level of evaluation and critical thinking because you are having to make a judgement about the usefulness of a system. This is likely to involve comparing the strengths of one system with another, thereby, contributing to a more in-depth level of analysis.
2. Secondly, the practice of being critical is about showing the marker that you have read widely and understood different interpretations and points of view, even if there will never be any application of your discussion and findings.

3. Thirdly, despite being a potential novice within a discipline, reading widely and drawing on the criticisms of other authors (with acknowledgement of your sources) will provide you with the skills and knowledge to competently evaluate the workings and ideas of experts.
4. Finally, try not to overestimate the value and certainty of any one theory or point of view, because it is highly unlikely that a single organisation or person can ever totally account for the entire conglomeration of circumstances, positions, and interpretations within their belief system, which has been shaped at a particular point in time.

Included within the practice of being critical, I have already highlighted the concept of evaluation. However, in addition to this, the notions of refutation and justification are also worthy of mention. When you participate in the practice of evaluation, you may also enter the domain of refutation, which is about raising counter-evidence for the purpose of highlighting its weaknesses. This is a powerful strategy in arguing because it shows that you are mindful of the opposition's point of view, but you are also astute enough to evaluate the evidence on its merits, thereby conceding to its strengths as well as confirming weaknesses. In other words, if you provide both sides of a debate, this functions to demonstrate balance and lack of bias, leading to a carefully considered evaluation and outcome. In the process of carrying out this evaluation, you are also working to justify your overall position more persuasively. By presenting counter points of view and then minimising them, your position is strengthened. This whole procedure offers a more solid and thorough analytic foundation on which to base and therefore, justify, your point of view. Consequently, being critical also functions as a means of justifying your overall position and conclusion(s). Ultimately, this practice of being critical offers the marker a scholarly context in which to make an informed opinion.

What is Available for Critique

Nothing goes untouched when it comes to carrying out a critique. For instance, you can start with the very topic addressed by the authors and whether or not it appropriately deals with the concerns and issues that need to be discussed within a wider social, cultural, and/or political context. It may be that the authors have developed their topic of focus from a particular position, which neglects other, more pressing issues. In fact, the authors may have failed to consider an important component because of the potential difficulties surrounding access or measurement. Nevertheless, they still could have negotiated these difficulties or, at least, justified why they chose not to pursue them.

In addition to critiquing the nature of the topic chosen, you can also consider alternative ways of analysing the issue. In particular, the authors may have decided to adopt a quantitative approach to their investigation. This in itself upholds particular beliefs and assumptions, which may function to neglect other ways of understanding an issue. Alternatively, the authors may have chosen a qualitative approach, which may present limitations in areas such as measurement, validity, and reliability, depending on the particular philosophical position you choose to support.

Beyond the method of analysis and topic, you can consider how accurately the data has been interpreted. There may have been broad generalisations which have little bearing on what actually happens in real life. Secondly, alternative explanations could have been drawn from some aspects of the data, yet these were not mentioned by the authors. Thirdly, interpretations may not fit well with the theoretical underpinnings explained at the beginning. Moreover, problems with interpretation may result from poorly designed and inaccurate data collection where potential for misrepresentation and carelessness are high.

The type of argument used to support the author's philosophical position may present another area for critique. For instance, the argument may not be rigorous enough to dissuade you from alternative explanations. Further, you may have identified better arguments in support of the same idea in other readings.

Finally, the type of philosophical approach underlying the work can be made available for critique. In this I mean you can focus on the weaknesses or gaps that the philosophical approach does not address. This can be achieved by identifying the points addressed in other relevant philosophical positions, and then demonstrating how these points are not covered by the author's philosophical approach, followed by the potential outcomes gained if another philosophical approach had been utilised.

Steps for Developing Critical Thought

- Make up a list of the strengths and weaknesses or limitations surrounding a topic.
- Consider the advantages and disadvantages pertaining to an issue.
- Write down the costs and benefits of a solution or outcome.
- Carry out a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis.
- Carry out a PESTLE (political, economic, sociological, technological, legal, environmental) analysis. For example, consider the political implications at local, national, and international borders; evaluate the economic impact of a system globally and locally; identify the system's effect(s) on society; overview the impact of technological change; highlight the legal consequences nationally and internationally; and identify the issue's environmental impact globally and locally.
- Question.....Is the argument based on factual evidence that can be proven, or is it merely constructed around biased opinion?
- Does the theory come from only one perspective?
- Look at the topic from different angles. Imagine yourself in the role of someone occupying a different social identity (a woman, man, elderly citizen, greenie, artist, activist, chief executive, politician), and ponder the pros and cons surrounding the topic from this other perspective, as well as the gaps in the topic which neglect your needs and concerns.
- What are the issues at stake for the author? What political motivations are involved? Are there political motivations?
- Does the author provide an inclusive range of options?
- Is the evidence convincing?
- Is the theory logically presented? Does the theory explain all of the outcomes and processes?
- How old is the study/investigation/research? Has any other research disproved or disagreed with the conclusions drawn?
- How many participants were included? Were they students? Did participants come from different cultural backgrounds or did they reflect one cultural group? How old were participants? Were there equal numbers of males and females?
- Could another researcher repeat the methods used and have a reasonable chance of getting the same or similar results?
- Are limitations of the research or theory acknowledged?
- Are there competing theories which offer better explanations?
- Are there more effective, more scientific, more reliable, more cultural sensitive, more ecologically valid, or more practical methods that the researchers could have used?

Organising Your Critique

Once you have researched and gathered together relevant points to support your critique, it is timely to give some thought to the way this material will be organised and packaged in your writing. The key at this stage is to consider the most convincing order in which to present your material. For instance, if you have 4 points that support your critique and 3 points that dispute your critique, would it be better to present your supporting points first or last? Here are some suggestions for different ways to order your argument.

Supporting points first followed by opposition's points

The advantage with this strategy is that your points are given primacy, and you begin your argument on a strong footing. This structure also allows you to mention the strength of your point of view twice: once at the beginning, and a second time when you minimise the criticisms against your points, thereby reinforcing the strengths of your own position. The disadvantage of this approach is that you may come across with a weak argument, because you end your writing with a defence of your position against opposing points. Secondly, when mentioning the opposition's points, this may function to in turn undermine your own points, which leads to your argument coming off less persuasively.

Opposition's points first followed by supporting points

Although there may be less opportunity to reinforce the strength of your position twice, your argument may come across more strongly because first mention of your position occurs for the direct purpose of undermining the opposition's point of view. The final information accessed by the reader constitutes the strength of your position.

Individual points debated

In this structure, each point from the opposition is responded to separately. The advantage of this structure is that it removes any back-tracking in details because each for and against issue is dealt with at the same time.

Most central to least central

Within this structure, the focus is on the particular order in which to present each of your supporting points. In this case, the most central of your supporting points is mentioned first. The advantage is that this makes your argument convincing and persuasive from the beginning.

Least central to most central

Within this structure, the focus is on the particular order in which to present each of your supporting points. In this case, the least central of your supporting points is mentioned first. The advantage is that the last point accessed by the reader is the strongest of all the points made. Due to the fact that this is the final piece of information that the reader is likely to receive, such information is likely to remain in the reader's mind for a longer period, which may, therefore, lead to greater recall and greater primacy in the reader's thoughts.

In summary, ...

Being critical in your writing is about not just accepting what others argue for and conclude. It is about a carefully considered evaluation. It should be justifiable, that is, you should be able to support your critique with evidence, and it should also be balanced – so you can mention the pros as well as the cons. Often, it is difficult to feel experienced enough to be able to provide a critique of someone's work. A useful tip is to locate a (literature) review of the issue you have to critique and draw on the criticisms mentioned in the review, of course with acknowledgement of your source(s).

An Introduction to Marking Guides

The kinds of marking guides used at university can vary according to discipline, department, and course co-ordinator. Further, the individual preferences of the marker, who may be the course co-ordinator / lecturer, or a postgraduate student who has been given guidance from the course co-ordinator, will have a significant bearing on your grade. Generally, however, the marking criterion for assignments at university is likely to be divided into two broad areas – content and form.

Content is about the quality of the discussion you raise. This includes the depth and coverage of your explanations and descriptions, the type of evidence you use to support your points, and how well you are able to evaluate the issues you have been assigned. In contrast, form relates to technical aspects of writing, such as whether you have followed grammatical rules and correct spelling, and how clearly you have documented your evidence in the body of the assignment and in the Reference List at the back of your assignment. Form also extends to the physical presentation of the assignment, which involves conforming to the instructions given for formatting, such as page margins and word limits.

Here is a broad list of criteria that markers may be looking for in your assignment, which have been adapted from Holmes (1995):

Content

Coverage: Have you carried out all the requirements of the assignment thoroughly?

Relevance: Is what you have written relevant to the requirements of the assignment?

Overall structure: Is the overall structure of your assignment clear?

Understanding: Do you show understanding of the content of the topic selected and relevant concepts for evaluating it?

Use of terms: Do you use technical terms accurately and appropriately?

Clarity of explanation: Are your explanations clear, logical, and understandable?

Reading: Do you show evidence of having read widely in the relevant area?

Critical viewpoint: Can you see flaws in the theories/frameworks used in the topic being discussed?

Form

Written expression: Grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Documentation: What references have you used to support your ideas? Are they correctly listed at the end and correctly cited in the text of your assignment?

Word limits: Did you keep to the word limit?

Presentation: Is your assignment clearly presented and readable?

Content					
	Rating Scale For Each Criterion				
	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Good	Very Good	Outstanding
Coverage	1	2	3	4	5
Relevance	1	2	3	4	5
Overall Structure	1	2	3	4	5
Understanding	1	2	3	4	5
Use of terms	1	2	3	4	5
Clarity of explanation	1	2	3	4	5
Reading	1	2	3	4	5
Critical Viewpoint	1	2	3	4	5

Form					
Written expression	1	2	3	4	5
Documentation	1	2	3	4	5
Word limits	1	2	3	4	5
Presentation	1	2	3	4	5

Here is a different example of a marking schedule available to Massey course coordinators and lecturers. Although this guide is not used by all markers, some may adopt the same or similar evaluation criteria.

Scope of assignment:	50%
Evidence of Reading:	10%
Structure and Organisation:	30%
Presentation:	10%
TOTAL	100%

Getting an A on Your Assignment

To get a grade within the A range (A- /A /A+), you need to fulfil more than the necessary requirements to pass. In other words, you need to produce a piece of work that is over and above an accepted standard. Below is a list of details expanding on each of the four marking criterion displayed on the previous page for an acceptable and competently carried out assignment. Such an assignment may receive a grade within the B range (B- / B / B+), however this will very much depend on the style and preferences of individual markers.

Scope of Assignment

You have provided an acceptable interpretation of the topic, which may mean that you have developed a logical response to the assignment task. "Acceptable" is likely to involve a subjective judgement, unique to the individual course requirements and marker preferences. Nevertheless, if your response to the assignment differs from mainstream views, you should still be able to attain a grade of value by ensuring that you have referred to examples, explanations, and research evidence from the literature.

It is also important to ensure that you have covered several different aspects relevant to the topic, and not just one. In particular, a balance in views may be useful here where you have considered and acknowledged different or opposing points of view from different authors. This demonstrates to the reader, who is also your marker, that you have thought widely about the topic and are less likely to take a biased position.

Evidence of Reading

This is entwined with scope in that it expects you to have read and referred to relevant literature, typically in the form of the readings and/or textbook chapters as part of the materials for your course. This criterion also requires you to have accurately constructed a list of references at the end of your assignment, which meets the standards of the referencing convention used in your discipline/course, such as APA, MLA, or Harvard.

Structure

The structure of an assignment relates to how you present your ideas. This covers having a logical sequence in which to order your points, ideally, with each paragraph indicating a separate main point. It also means that you need to create additional structure through an introductory section, which may take the form of a paragraph or a few sentences. Likewise, you should also have an ending section where you summarise your ideas and briefly restate your argument in a few sentences or a whole paragraph.

Finally, structure may also entail clarity in expression. Hence, it is useful to consider explaining definitions and terms where relevant. Remember that while the reader is likely to be knowledgeable in the topic you are writing about, they want to see that you have understood the issues and ideas. So it is often good to imagine yourself writing for your peers, rather than the expert marker, which allows you plenty of room to elaborate and highlight your comprehension of the topic.

Presentation

This is usually allocated the least amount of marks in any assignment. However, it is also an area where you can gain the most marks out of the total allocated for this section because it typically requires you to follow instructions, which, hopefully, have been clearly laid out. It is expected that you will present your work clearly. Ideally, typed printing is easier to read than handwritten assignments. Keep in mind other formatting conventions to follow, like a 4cm margin for the markers comments, and one and a half or double spacing of lines so that it is easier to read, as well as grammar and spelling. Overall, to pass an assignment it is expected that you will have met most of these standards.

Now, to get an A requires you to go that extra mile (or kilometre), beyond a competent and acceptable standard. The following list demonstrates some of the extra features that may be included in an assignment awarded a grade within the A range.

- Integrating additional references beyond those assigned in the course, which are included in your assignment to demonstrate new points, or extend and reinforce other points.
- Including some critical reflection and evaluation of the topic and/or the points used to support your argument.
- Including some original analysis of the issue or integrating the ideas in an original way by, for instance, adopting a broader framework in which to position your points.
- Providing two or three pieces of evidence from the literature to back up all or almost all your points.
- Integrating many points that are relevant to the topic, including sub-themes and further sub-themes and / or points from alternative angles that may not necessarily be mainstream.

Overall, getting a grade within the A range is difficult and involves a lot of hard work.

Nevertheless, achieving a grade close to an A, such as grades within the B range demonstrates that you have also done well to achieve a competent standard, with potential and promise for even greater work in the future.

What follows is a list of some of the common errors made in assignments, which may contribute towards the lowering of a grade.

- Relying too much on quotations and not using your own words to explain others' ideas. Remember, when you explain information in your own words, this demonstrates to the marker that you have clearly understood the topic.
- Providing too little support from your readings and/or textbook to back up your points.
- Covering only a few points related to the topic, rather than the full scope of issues and sub-issues.
- Including details about the topic which are too brief, and, which require more explanation through examples, details of events, and / or evidence from theories or studies.

- Providing too little explanation of the ideas in your readings and / or textbook that relate to the assignment topic.
- Failing to follow accepted standards in acknowledging the work and/or ideas of other authors in your text and in the Reference List at the back of the assignment.
- Providing a structure to your assignment that is very difficult and / or uninteresting to follow, such as not having a very clear introduction telling the reader what you are going to focus on, having points that do not lead logically on from one to another, and having a conclusion that merely restates what you said in the Introduction.
- Having too many presentation errors.

The following section goes on to consider the particular levels of educational tasks embedded in many assessment questions (including those for written assignments) by looking at Bloom and others' (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives.

Hierarchy in Assessment Tasks

Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl (1956) conducted an in-depth analysis of the types of educational objectives embedded in tests and exams that are constructed by academics. Their analysis revealed a series of categories that different test questions may fall into for testing students' competence as follows: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. While the categories are central to tests and exams, they can also be useful to keep in mind when answering assignments.

- **Knowledge** – this represents a basic level of competence expected in assessment through the recalling, naming, and identifying of facts, theories, and concepts.
- **Comprehension** – this is fundamental to answering any test, exam, and written assessment because it is about the demonstration of understanding, which goes beyond mere recall and identification. Comprehension is likely to involve the following:
 - Thoroughly explaining the subtle and not so subtle features.
 - Making links with other ideas and concepts.
 - Summarising main points/features.
 - Suggesting reasons or causal factors.
 - Interpreting information may also be involved. This may be achieved by comparing and contrasting with other similar and different information to highlight the significance or insignificance of the information in question.
- **Application** – this level requires –
 - In-depth knowledge and understanding of information to the point that the knowledge can then be transported and incorporated into a new context outside of the current contexts in which the information has been presented in the course.
 - The ability to show how academic concepts have real world value and utility.

Application may be awarded more marks, than say the previous level, because it involves having a good grasp of the concepts and details beyond an academic context to the point of being able to understand and apply information to innovative and real world situations.

- **Analysis** – this integrates many of the levels already covered in terms of identifying relevant and applicable knowledge, and providing a thorough explanation of how this knowledge operates within a particular context. Analysis is central to any substantial piece of academic work because it involves
 - breaking something down
 - examining its component parts separately as well as how these parts operate within a whole, and
 - generally looking at an issue from different angles.

Analysis has similarities with comprehension as –

- a thorough explanation of features,
- making links with other ideas and concepts,
- summarising main points/features, and
- suggesting reasons or causal factors

are all activities required in carrying out an in-depth investigation, or, in other words, an analysis of a topic. The application of a particular procedure or process to be used in the analysis may also be relevant. Due to the fact that the analysis category includes so many of the features mentioned under the previous educational levels, it is likely that this category will be worth more marks than the other levels mentioned so far.

- **Synthesis** – this is one of the most difficult educational objectives or levels, and, as such, is likely to be awarded more marks than earlier objectives. Synthesis involves the creation of new ideas from old ones. This can be achieved by
 - combining and integrating different concepts, theories, and research under a new focus.

Typically, synthesis may consist of finding ways to link diverse ideas or developing a broader, overarching theme to group together distinct pieces of information. The reformulation involved in synthesis leads to drawing conclusions about what has come before.

- **Evaluation** – this is the highest educational objective identified by Bloom et al. (1956). More than any other objective, evaluation involves making a judgement about the value of something and backing up that decision with evidence. Such a process is likely to incorporate
 - each of the previous objectives, and
 - perhaps an emphasis on analysis, and
 - comparing and contrasting with other similar and different information to highlight the significance or insignificance of the information in question.

Other Useful Tips

Dealing with Feedback on Assignments

Receiving feedback is often one of the most difficult aspects of being a student because it involves elements of vulnerability and judgement.

After labouring over an assignment that incorporates much of yourself in respect to

- your own organisation and integration of points into the assignment,
- as well as your own choice of words and phrases,

you are then required to hand over your creation to someone else who pronounces judgement. This involves detaching yourself from the project, and, in many instances, doing so at a stage where there may be a feeling of incompleteness because not enough time has been available to fully finish the project, perhaps leading to feelings of regret and possibly guilt over not meeting personal and internal standards. At the same time, however, it is often a time of relief and excitement where you are no longer burdened by the task and can stand back and reflect in the achievement of relative completion.

After a delay of many weeks, the assignment is returned with a grade or mark, which may not meet expectations. This may lead to frustration, disappointment, regret, and sometimes confusion after having spent many hours of hard work on the project. In managing the process of dealing with feedback, some tips and strategies are suggested to help you gain the most from the experience. So, before reading assignment feedback, try to keep the following in mind:

- Being a student is a learning experience, which offers its own unique lessons of personal discovery for each individual participant.
- Mistakes are not mistakes, in the conventional sense, but opportunities to learn.
- Constructive criticism leads to opportunities for improvement. (Without feedback, how can anyone progress and improve?)
- Each person enters university from a different cultural background, with different expectations, and with varying and diverse levels of prior participation in education.
- The mark or grade awarded is the judgement of one individual, within a specific cultural and historical context.
- The mark or grade is based on one piece of work within the entirety of a person's life, which does not reflect or acknowledge the management of all other tasks and commitments achieved.

When receiving feedback, try to always allow some time to reflect deeply about the comments made so improvement can be gained the next time round. If you think your assignment feedback is inadequate or unfair, contact your course co-ordinator for clarification.

Procrastination

Procrastination can be defined as the avoidance of doing things that need to be done, and is commonly encountered by students when undertaking a course of study, including the writing of assignments. The act of procrastinating may arise from any one or a combination of beliefs as follows:

- having excessively high standards.
- not seeing the relevance of the assignment.
- lacking clarity in how to manage the assignment.
- fearing the unknown process surrounding assignment writing.
- imagining catastrophes you will encounter while doing the assignment that function to prevent you from starting.
- feeling less than sufficiently skilled to complete the assignment.

To limit the effects of procrastination, several strategies are offered:

- Break your assignment into small, manageable tasks. This will allow you to use small sections of time instead of waiting for complete days, which may not eventuate.
- Set realistic timeframes with flexibility to deal with life crises.
- Look at the purpose of what you are doing and remind yourself of the end goal as a way into seeing the relevance of your study to your life.
- Reward yourself after small tasks. This will help retain the motivation.

Remember that great writers always have to start somewhere. It is rare for complete products of writing to develop in a short period of time. Rather, the process of writing takes time and involves transitions and transformations in thinking, understanding, and creating. To give justice to these stages in academic development, it is vital that adequate time is given to each stage. To achieve this, you **REALLY** do need to start an assignment as **SOON** as **YOU CAN!**

Perfectionism

This is an equally paralysing activity and has associations with procrastination. Perfectionism may also arise from excessively high standards involving absolutist, all-or-nothing attitudes, such as “anything less than an A is not worth it”. Pursuing the need to follow a routine perfectly to get a perfect result, such as waiting for the perfect moment to start writing, may be a further factor driving perfectionist ideals. The following strategies are offered to manage perfectionism.

- Value the process, not just the outcome.
- If you break goals into smaller ones, it is easier to get an on-going sense of achievement.
- Put your efforts into those things that will gain the most return - writing.
- See mistakes as opportunities to learn.

Remember, nothing can ever be perfect because it is impossible to produce something that takes into account every angle / argument / perspective, since everyone brings to an assignment their own situated perspective. The remaining pages of this book now cover a series of supplementary resources that deal with the micro elements of writing, such as grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Parts of Speech

- Nouns** Nouns name something. A proper noun names a particular person, place, or thing. A common noun names a general class of things.
Examples
stone, tree, house, George, America, California, committee, herd, navy
- Pronouns** Pronouns stand in for nouns. The noun a pronoun represents is called its antecedent.
Examples
I, you, he, she, it, we, they, you, who, which, that, what, this, these, those, such, one, any, each, few, some, anyone, everyone, somebody, each, another.
- Verbs** Verbs express actions or a state of being.
Examples
hit, run, walk, meditate, is, are, sing
- Adjectives** Adjectives describe nouns or pronouns.
Examples
green, beautiful, fat
- Adverbs** Adverbs describe verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs.
Examples
slightly, after
- Prepositions** Prepositions link nouns or pronouns to another word in the sentence.
Examples
by, from, for
- Conjunctions** Conjunctions join words, phrases, and clauses.
Examples
and, but, or, yet, since, because
- Interjections** Interjections interrupt the usual flow of the sentence to emphasise feelings.
Examples
oh, ouch, alas

Common Errors in Grammar and Punctuation: A Checklist for Proofreading

Before you hand in any piece of writing, use this list to make any necessary corrections. Remember that the grammar checker on your computer may help you, but it can mislead you.

Incomplete sentences

1. **Using the *-ing* for a verb as a complete verb.**

x He being the most capable student in the class.

Correction: either change *being* to *is* or use a comma to attach the whole phrase to a complete sentence.

2. **Punctuating a dependent clause as though it were a complete sentence.**

x Even if it has a capital letter and a full stop.

x Which is why I always carry an umbrella.

Correction: Join the whole phrase onto a complete sentence; commas may be needed, depending on which part of the sentence the phrase is attached to.

Lack of agreement

3. **Using a plural verb for a singular subject (or vice versa).**

x One of the most widespread trends have been increased advertising by tertiary institutions.

Correction: change *have* to *has* (*one...has*, not *one.....have*).

x The College of Education are located on the Hokowhitu site in Palmerston North.

Correction: even though the college is made up of a large number of people, the college itself is singular ("The College of Education is...")

4. **Using a pronoun that does not agree in number or gender with the noun to which it refers (its antecedent).**

x Each university has to keep within their budget.

Correction: change the pronoun *their* to *its* because *each university* (the antecedent) is singular (as the verb *has* indicates).

Inconsistency

5. **Inconsistent tenses.**

x The sun was shining brightly, but the temperature is quite cold.

Correction: put both verbs (*was shining* and *is*) in the present or the past tense.

6. **Faulty parallels.**

x Children enjoy painting, drawing, and to make things.

Correction: change to *make* to *making* so that it matches *painting* and *drawing*. This mistake is often made in bulleted lists.

Joining sentences incorrectly

7. **Running two sentences together (a run-on sentence).**

x This is my last assignment I only have to sit the exam now.

Correction: put a semicolon or a full stop after *assignment*.

8. **Joining ("splicing") two complete sentences with only a comma (a comma splice)**

x My first essay was not very good, this one is much better.

Correction: either put in a conjunction like *but* after the comma, or place a semicolon or full stop after *good*.

9. **Using an adverb** (Such as *consequently, hence, however, meanwhile, moreover, nevertheless, otherwise, or therefore*) **instead of a conjunction** (such as *and, although, as because, but, if, unless, until, when, whereas, or while*) **to join two sentences (also a comma splice).**

x Some students earn high marks for internal assessment, however they do not always do so well in exams .

Correction: change the comma before however to a semicolon or a full stop.

10. **Omitting the comma when two sentences are joined by a co-ordinating conjunction** (*and, but, for, nor, or, so, or yet*).

x The academic year used to be only two semesters long but it is increasingly extended to three.

Correction: insert a comma before a co-ordinating conjunction like but when it links two complete sentences (the comma is sometimes omitted in a short sentence).

Inaccurate embedding

11. **Omitting the comma after an introductory word or phrase at the beginning of a sentence.**

x However appropriate commas make meaning clearer.

Correction: add a comma after *However*.

12. **Omitting one on the commas when a pair of commas is needed.**

x At the end of the semester, when the lectures are over students have to sit exams.

Correction: the phrase *when the lectures are over* needs a comma at each end because it is an embedding and not a part of the main sentence structure.

Adding unnecessary commas

13. **Placing a single comma between the subject and the verb of a sentence.**

x All the trees that have lost their leaves, will grow new ones in the spring.

Correction: remove the comma between the subject (All the trees that have lost their leaves) and the verb phrase (will grow).

14. **Placing a comma before a final dependent clause.**

x Punctuation matters, because it helps readers to understand a written text.

Correction: no comma is needed before a final dependent clause (such as one beginning with *although, because, if, since, unless, or when*) unless there is a strong contrast between the main clause and the dependent clause.

15. **Placing a comma before a restrictive clause.**

x The Pohutukawa is a New Zealand tree, that flowers at Christmas time.

Correction: the words *that flowers at Christmas time* make up a defining or restrictive clause, one that limits the meaning of *tree*. This clause does not present extra information, but is an essential part of the sentence and therefore should not be separated from the rest of the sentence by a comma.

Inappropriate colons and semicolons

16. **Using an unnecessary colon.**

x Some of the main reasons for going to university are: to learn about interesting subjects, to meet new people, and to prepare for employment.

Correction: either omit the colon or make sure there is a complete sentence before it, for example by adding the words *the following after are*.

- 17 **Using a semicolon instead of a colon.**

x These items were on the breakfast menu; cereal, toast, tea, and coffee.

Correction: use a colon, not a semicolon, to introduce the list after menu.

Misplaced or omitted apostrophes

18. Unnecessary apostrophes

x talk's, sleep's, avocado's, banana's, serie's, business'

Correction: present-tense, third person singular verbs ending in /s/ (she *talks*, he *sleeps*) do not need apostrophes; plural nouns (avocados, bananas) do not need apostrophes just because they are plural; no noun requires an apostrophe just because it happens to end in /s/ (*series; business*).

19. Confusing its for it's and whose for who's.

x Its for the person who's birthday is today. Does the dog recognise it's name?

Correction: *its* means *belonging to it*; *it's* means *it is* or *it has*; *whose* means *belonging to who*; *who's* means *who is* or *who has*.

20. Apostrophes on the wrong side of the /s/.

X one boy's toy truck; two boy's toy trucks

Correction: to use an apostrophe with a possessive noun or indefinite pronoun (*anyone, everyone, each other, one, others, or someone else*), write the name of the possessor (*one boy; two boys*), add an apostrophe after it (*one boy'; two boys'*), and add an /a/ after the apostrophe if you pronounce one (*one boy's; two boys'*).

Missing errors

21. Question marks with indirect questions.

x There was a question in everyone's mind about how stable the bridge was?

Correction: this is a statement not a question, so it should end with a full stop, not a question mark.

Spelling errors

22. Confusion over the plural forms of classical words (such as *data, criteria, media, and phenomena*).

x there were no objective criterias for showing that the data was inaccurate.

Correction: the plural of *criterion* is *criteria*; the word *data* is always plural (*the data were.....*).

23. American spelling.

x color, labor, theatre, center, traveller, fulfil, defense, encyclopedia, program

Correction: colour, labour, theatre, centre, traveller, fulfil, defence, encyclopaedia, programme (but *computer program*).

24. Confusing words that are similar in sound or meaning.

x The main affect of the scandal was that the principle had to resign.

Correction: *affect* is a verb meaning *to influence*; a *principle* is a rule or idea. The sentence should read, "The main *effect* of the scandal was that the *principal* had to resign". If necessary, consult a dictionary to be sure you can distinguish between the words in each pair: accept/except; affect/effect; principle/principal; practice/practise; advice/advise; between/among; fewer/less.

A word of advice: make your own list of words that you often misspell or the meaning of which you find confusing.

Tricky Words

Certain word pairs seem to confuse beginner writers and they may choose the wrong word. A list of the most commonly confused pairs follows:

Affect / Effect

Affect as a verb; use it when you mean that one thing influences another thing.

e.g. The wind will affect TV reception.

e.g. Rheumatic fever affected his heart.

Affected as an adjective

e.g. The affected parts of the plant were pruned.

e.g. An "affected" person behaves in a snobbish or artificial way.

Effect as a verb; use it when you mean one thing caused something else.

e.g. The storm effected a change to the appearance of the village.

e.g. He effected a political coup by sending in a private army.

Effect is usually used as a noun.

e.g. The yen has an effect on the Kiwi dollar.

e.g. The effects of the earthquake were felt in several countries.

Accept / Except

Accept is always a verb meaning "to take or receive", "to believe or approve", "to agree to" or "to take on".

e.g. He accepts the Treasurer's job.

e.g. Will you accept this proposal.

e.g. We all accept the principle of freedom of thought.

Except can be a verb, meaning "to leave out" or it can be a preposition meaning "apart from" or "excluding".

e.g. Citizens older than 50 are excepted from military duties.

e.g. Everyone must pay taxes, except (for) those without any income.

Advice / Advise

Advice is the noun form; check by seeing if you could put "some" in front of the word. eg The bank manager gave me (some) advice about my mortgage.

e.g. I advise you to reconsider.

Practice / Practise

Practice is the noun form and practise is the verb form.

e.g. She has a very successful dental practice.

e.g. You must practise your scales every day; Pianists need such regular practice.

To / Too

To is used as part of the infinitive verb.

e.g. to search and (to) find.

To is also a preposition used to show direction.

e.g. They travelled to Turkey; Please fax it to me.

Too is an adverb meaning "also", "as well as".

e.g. Cut up the onions, and the garlic too.

Too can also be used to express an excessive degree.

e.g. The soil is too dry for planting.

Were / We're / Where

Were is the plural past tense form of the verb "to be" and is used with "we", "you" and "they".
e.g. They were involved in an accident; Were you born in Australia?

We're is the contracted form of "we are" and is used informally.
e.g. We're having a barbecue after work this afternoon.

Where relates to place, point or position. Often, it forms part of a question.
e.g. Where did you buy that book?

It may also form part of a statement

e.g. Auckland is the place where I grew up; Where they live is a very new part of the town.

Strategies for Improving Spelling

(Adapted from Newby, M. (1989). *Writing: A guide for students*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, cited in Van der Krogt, C. (2001). *Academic writing: Study guide*. Palmerston North, New Zealand: College of Education, Massey University, pages 42-43.)

One way to improve your spelling is to analyse where you seem to be going wrong. There are different types of spelling errors. Understanding some of the different types of errors, and the reasons behind them, will help you to identify the types of spelling errors you make. This will help you to avoid them in the future.

Words that get confused because they sound like each other

too to two
hear here
feet feat
there their they're
through threw
know no
weather whether
won one
for four fore
your you're
paw pour pore
discrete discreet
licence license
practice practise
current currant
principle principal
effect affect
dependent dependant
accept except
who's whose

Words that have been put together into one
(the correct spellings are on the left in bold)

at least	atleast
such as	suchas
in spite	inspite
in front	infront
a lot	a lot
all right	alright

Words which have been split in two

instead	in stead
together	to gether
without	with out
already	all ready
although	all though
altogether	all together

Words where pronunciation gets in the way

favourite	favrit
perhaps	prehaps
miniature	minature
ancillary	ancilliary
would have	would of
sentence	sentance
involve	envolve
imaginary	imaginry
attract	attrac
comparison	comparision
input	imput

Words in which the endings are misspelled

appearance	appearence
available	availiable
attendant	attendent
responsible	responsable
formidable	formidible
definitely	definatly
applies	applys
existence	existance
independence	independance
dispensable	dispensible
absolutely	absolutly

Words with doubled-up letters

beginning	begining
committee	commitee / comittee
getting	geting
written	writen
too	to
innate	inate
accommodated	accomodated
aggression	agression

Words without doubled-up letters

fulfil	fulfill
fulfilment	fullfillment
commitment	committment
always	allways

Problems with 'e' and 'ing'

coming	comeing
taking	takeing
using	useing

More problems with 'e'

department	departement
considering	considereing
excitement	excitment
precisely	precisley
immediately	immediatley
truly	truely
address	adresse
statement	statment
lovely	lovley

Words with a missing sound

created	crated
literature	litrature
interesting	intresting

Words with letters swapped round

friend	freind
their	thier
strength	strentgh
height	hieght

Vowel sounds

retrieve	retreave
speech	speach

Problems with 's' and 'c'

necessary	necessary
dissociate	disociate
occasion	ocassion
conscious	conciuous / consious

Differences between British and American Spelling

(Adapted from Marriot, S., & Farrell, B. (1992). *Common errors in written English*. Edinburgh: Chambers, cited in Van der Krogt, C. (2001). *Academic writing: Study guide*. Palmerston North, New Zealand: College of Education, Massey University, page 44.)

Always write your assignment using British spelling, unless you know that your marker accepts American spelling. The main differences between British and American spelling are as follows:

1. Most words ending in –our in British English are spelt –or in American English.

British	colour	flavour	labour
American	color	flavor	labor

2. Words ending in –re in British English are usually written –er in American English.

British	theatre	centre	fibre
American	theater	center	fiber

3. With verbs which may end in –se or –ize, British spelling often uses –ise, and American always uses –ize.

British	specialise	realise	equalise
American	specialize	realize	equalize

4. Most words spelt –ogue in British English are spelt –og in American English.

British	analogue	catalogue	dialogue
American	analog	catalog	dialog

5. In British English some words double their consonants before -er or -ed and -ing (e.g. those ending in l or p). This is not the case in American English.

British	equalling	kidnapping	traveller
American	equaling	kidnaping	traveler

6. Words derived from Greek and Latin which have ae or oe in the middle, usually have e in American English.

British	encyclopaedia	gynaecologist	anaesthesia
American	encyclopedia	gynecologist	nesthesia

7. Other common words which are spelt differently.

British	American
programme	program
bank cheque	bank check
defence	defense
pretence	pretense
speciality	specialty

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