

Basic English Grammar Module

Unit 4: Grammar and Punctuation

Objectives of the Basic English Grammar module

As a student at any level of University study, when you write your assignments or your thesis, your writing needs to be grammatically well-structured and accurate in order to be clear. If you are unable to write sentences that are appropriately structured and clear in meaning, the reader may have difficulty understanding the meanings that you want to convey. Here are some typical and frequent comments made by markers or supervisors on students' written work. Such comments may also appear on marking sheets which use assessment criteria focussing on your grammar.

- *Be careful of your written expression.*
- *At times it is difficult to follow what you are saying.*
- *You must be clearer when making statements.*
- *Sentence structure and expression poor.*
- *This is not a sentence.*
- *At times your sentences do not make sense.*

In this module we are concerned with helping you to develop knowledge of those aspects of the grammar of English that will help you deal with the types of grammatical errors that are frequently made in writing.

Who is this module for?

All students at university who need to improve their knowledge of English grammar in order to write more clearly and accurately.

What does this module cover?

| | |
|---------|--|
| Unit 1A | Grammatical Units: the structure and constituents of the clause/sentence |
| Unit 1B | The Noun Group: the structure and constituents of the noun group |
| Unit 2A | The Verb Group: Finites and non-Finites |
| Unit 2B | The Verb Group: Tenses |
| Unit 3A | Logical Relationships between Clauses |
| Unit 3B | Interdependency Relationships between Clauses |
| Unit 4 | Grammar and Punctuation |

References

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Introduction

This unit is concerned with the uses of various punctuation marks and their relationship to the grammar. If punctuation is incorrectly used it may obscure the meaning of the written text or create ambiguity. In this unit we will focus on the uses of the comma, the semi-colon, the colon and the full stop.

You may find this unit helpful if you are having problems associated with punctuation. You are probably making errors in your sentences that look like the following:

Example 1: *Tea has a double-edged effect it can act on the nervous system as either a stimulant or a tranquiliser.*

Example 2: *The project has two main aims to reduce unemployment and to increase the numbers of women in the work force.*

Example 3: *Because the agar solution tends to evaporate during subsequent incubation. The edges of the coverslip were sealed to the slide.*




Example 4: *In the U.S. 30% of women, and 25% of men are obese, this encompasses 35 million adults.*

Objectives of Unit 4

After you have completed this unit you should be able to:

- understand the different ways in which punctuation marks are used and how they contribute to grammatical accuracy.
- apply this understanding to your own writing.

Exercises

These are marked with the icon  and you should try to complete them before checking your work in the **Answer Key**, marked  .

Answer Key to all Exercises

This can be found at the end of the Unit.

1.0 Introduction

There are four punctuation marks that are of particular importance in any type of writing. They are:

- the comma (,)
- the semi-colon (;)
- the colon (:)
- and the full-stop (.).

These are the punctuation marks that are used to separate the parts of a sentence and to mark the end of a sentence. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

1.1 The comma

The comma plays an important role in making sentences easier to read and helps to avoid confusions of meaning or ambiguity. Because it is the most flexible of punctuation marks it is difficult to give general rules; however, commas are generally used in the situations described below.

1.1.1 Adverbial conjunctions

If you use adverbials such as **nevertheless**, **moreover** and **however** at the beginning of a sentence, they are usually followed by a comma.

Example:

*He failed the exam. **However**, he didn't give up.*

1.1.2 Word groups within clauses

In the sentences you write you may put a word or group of words in the middle of a clause or another group of words. In this situation you should separate the word or words from the rest of the clause by using commas. This shows your reader these items are not part of the clauses or word groups in which they are located.

Examples:

*The solution is, **according to Smith (2007)**, appropriate.*

*He is, **nevertheless**, wrong.*

*The data, **in that respect**, are unsatisfactory.*

1.1.3 Clauses within long sentences

If you have written a very long sentence, one way to help the reader understand the

structure of the sentence is to use a comma to mark the end of a clause.

Example:

If occasionally this general discussion of statistical results gives rise to the impression that some of the utterances are "ex cathedra", it is emphasised that there is a statistical justification for all conclusions drawn as indicated by available verifications presented in the table of intercorrelations, the table of factor loadings, and the table of residuals.

In this example, placing the comma before **it** helps the reader to better understand the structure of the sentence.

Similarly, in long sentences with many clauses within clauses, the use of a comma is very important in understanding the structure and thus the meaning.

Read the following sentence in which the commas have been removed.

Example:

Fungi play an unwanted role in biodeterioration often visible as mould on damp surfaces or materials or less obviously as timber rots.

Now look at the same sentence after commas have been inserted.

Fungi play an unwanted role in biodeterioration, often visible as mould on damp surfaces or materials, or less obviously as timber rots.

Using commas in this long sentence makes it much easier to understand the meaning that the writer is trying to convey.

1.1.4 Defining and non-defining relative clauses

An important use of the comma is to separate a **non-defining relative clause** from the rest of the sentence or main clause. If the comma is omitted then your reader may think the clause is defining. Conversely, if you use the comma with a defining relative clause your reader will think the clause is non-defining. In either case the meaning of your sentence may be misinterpreted.

Look at the example to see how the meaning can change if the comma is used incorrectly.

Example:

Men, whose wives are dead, are widowers.

In this example the writer has used commas and so has made 'whose wives are dead' a non-defining relative clause. The meaning is that **all men are widowers**. This is not true and so the meaning is incorrect. The writer should have used a defining relative clause and no commas, as follows:

Men whose wives are dead are widowers.

1.1.5 Dependent clauses – finite and non-finite

If a dependent clause occurs at the beginning of a sentence, it is usually followed by a comma.

Example:

Although the lifesaver tried to resuscitate the man, he died.

If you put a dependent clause in the middle of another clause, it should be enclosed by commas, especially if the clause is non-finite or if it is long.

Examples:

The faculty, *if it is sensible,* will make more effort to assist the students.

The faculty, *to enrol more students,* upgraded its facilities.

As well, if you are using a participle clause (where the main verb is an **-n** or **-ing** form), it should be marked off by commas.

Examples:

The faculty, *unsupported by the administration,* had to change its policies.

The faculty, *knowing the difficulties,* went ahead anyway.

1.1.6 The comma and lists

You should put a comma between each item in a list. The word **and** should go before the last item. The word **and** does not usually have a comma before it.

Example:

The apparatus consisted of *tubing, wood planks, rope and screws.*

The list can also be words or phrases that have the same grammatical form:

He *eats, drinks and talks* too much.

or it can be several descriptive words that are used together:

Glass is a **hard, brittle, transparent** material.

The exercise that follows will give you practice is recognising these different situations.

★ Exercise 1

Insert commas in the following sentences where appropriate.

1. The department knows the type of student they want and plans whatever the obstacles to get them.
2. The fire having been lit for some time the room was quite warm.
3. The fire having been lit for some time needed more wood.
4. In China a vast country there is a huge population.
5. The engine stalled the brakes failed and the car started to roll backward.
6. He should submit his thesis immediately because if it is not received before the end of the semester despite how good it is it will be rejected.
7. The Liberal party having been defeated in the last election needs to elect a new leader.
8. The man who owns the car will return next week.
9. If possible the students will be given an exemption.
10. Leaving the assignment too late can be a mistake. If for example an additional assignment is given there will be no time to finish it.

★ ★ You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

1.2 The semi-colon

If you think of the **full stop** as the 'strongest' of punctuation marks, and the **comma** as the 'weakest', then the **semi-colon** is somewhere in between. It is used a bit like **and**.

It is often used to join together two or more sentences or independent clauses where the second clause or sentence may be **too closely related** to what went before to be cut off by a full stop. It is often possible to use a full stop instead of a semi-colon but if there is a close association of meaning between the two independent clauses (especially if they are short), then the semi-colon may be better as it doesn't indicate a clear break between the ideas.

Example:

They weren't show animals; we just had them as pets.

That clock doesn't go; it's broken.

The following is the type of mistake that students often make in their writing. They put a comma between two short independent clauses.

Example:

Clean water is a basic human need, its presence is crucial for all densely populated societies.

If you are making this type of mistake in your writing, there are different ways to correct it:

- replace the comma with a semi-colon

Clean water is a basic human need; its presence is crucial for all densely populated societies.

- replace the comma with a full stop

Clean water is a basic human need. Its presence is crucial for all densely populated societies.

- insert a co-ordinating or subordinating conjunction

Clean water is a basic human need **and** its presence is crucial for all densely populated societies.

Since clean water is a basic human need, its presence is crucial for all densely populated societies.

A semi-colon may also be used with lists if the items in the list are long and if they contain commas within themselves.

Example:

There are a number of points to be aware of in creating an efficient working environment: keep the computer out of direct sunlight; place it away from chemical fumes and containers filled with fluid - such as coffee cups, flower vases and so on; maintain a sturdy work surface, free from vibration; and operate it within a certain range of temperature.

In this example you can see that reader is helped by having the items marked off more clearly. If the semi-colon had not been used, it would have been extremely difficult to understand the sentence.

★ Exercise 2

Punctuate the following sentences using commas or semi-colons.

1. In order to attract private investors to this sector of the accommodation industry it is recommended that the Council should encourage the private sector to provide incentives.
2. This practice then increases the demand for accommodation.
3. The law should not discriminate between people it should treat all people as equal.
4. Waverly is one of the smallest municipalities in terms of area in the Sydney Metropolitan Region. However with a total population of 59,000 in 1986 it was the most densely settled municipality in Sydney.
5. The unions are not asking for more money they are asking for better working conditions.

★ ★ You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

1.4 The colon

The colon indicates an even closer relationship between parts of a sentence than the semi-colon. It is often used to point forward to an explanation or restatement of meaning, an example, a quotation or a list. The colon is frequently equivalent to expressions such as **namely, as follows, for example, such as**. These expressions are often unnecessary if you insert a colon.

The following examples will illustrate this:

Examples:

The experiment demonstrated one thing: the apparatus was defective.

One fact was obvious: all men are not equal.

The Council had two aims: to increase taxes and to maintain the same rates.

Also use the colon to introduce quoted material, particularly if it covers more than one sentence.

Example:

The Times commented: 'The economy has been in trouble...'

★ Exercise 3

Correct the faulty punctuation in the following. Re-write the sentence if necessary.

1. Four types of problems have commonly been identified spelling punctuation illegible handwriting and poor paragraphing.

.....

2. In some centres the teaching approach is learner-centred. Whereas in other schools it is teacher-centred.

.....

3. Unemployment in Puerto Rico is said to be 10.4 per cent in Trinidad 14 per cent.

.....

4. This was one of Hall's major achievements he persuaded his party to carry out a necessary but suicidal reform.

.....

5. Rev. James Watson was reported as saying 'If there is such a thing as conscience then there are white men in Australia whose consciences must have the lash of scorpions.'

.....

★ ★ You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

1.5 The full stop

The full stop is used to mark the end of all sentences except direct questions (?) and exclamations (!).

★ Exercise 4

The passage below contains four sentences. Put in capital letters and fill stops where necessary. No other punctuation is needed.

Dunstan was a man in a hurry during his first two years as Attorney-General but he seems to have slowed down since becoming Premier in many ways he has been all the more effective for that his term at the top of the political heap in South Australia has coincided with the greatest change in political alignment ever seen in that State it could be argued that Dunstan has been the architect of that realignment

★ ★ You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

A full stop is also used with initials and abbreviations. Some examples are given in the box.

I.K. Brunel, e.g. (example), ed.(editor), p. (page), ch. (chapter), no. (number), vol. (volume)
a.m., p.m., co. (company), e.m.f. (electromotive force), etc.

Please note that it is incorrect to add a full stop to the symbols for units of measurement and chemical elements. Here are some examples:

| | | | |
|----|----------|----|---------|
| m | metre | C | carbon |
| kg | kilogram | Fe | iron |
| V | volt | U | uranium |

2.0 The Academic Context

Using the correct punctuation is one way to help your readers understand more easily and clearly the structure of your sentences and hence the meaning you are trying to convey and the arguments you are trying to make.

In the following exercise you are asked to punctuate the texts appropriately. Before beginning, read the texts first and notice how difficult it is to get the sense of what is being said without the appropriate use of punctuation marks.

★ Exercise 5

TEXT 1

The technique has many advantages over conventional bioassays in liquid media it is simpler it is not subject to interference by inhibitors that occur naturally in crude sample extracts or result from extraction procedures and it can be used directly to identify the small amounts of material contained in spots cut out from paper chromatograms.

TEXT 2

Before we talk about varying paragraphs let's establish what a paragraph is a paragraph is a group of sentences that conveys a group of connected ideas the particular way you group ideas is individual it is part of your individual style just remember that the same philosophy about varying sentences applies to varying paragraphs if your paragraphs don't vary in size and structure your writing will drag

★ ★ You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

Unit 3A: Answer Key to Exercises

★ ★ Exercise 1: Answer

1. The department knows the type of student they want and plans, whatever the obstacles, to get them.
2. The fire having been lit for some time, the room was quite warm.
3. The fire, having been lit for some time, needed more wood.
4. In China, a vast country, there is a huge population.
5. The engine stalled, the brakes failed and the car started to roll backward.
6. He should submit his thesis immediately because, if it is not received before the end of the semester, despite how good it is, it will be rejected.
7. The Liberal Party, having been defeated in the last election, needs to elect a new leader.
8. The man who owns the car will return next week.
9. If possible, the students will be given an exemption.
10. Leaving the assignment too late can be a mistake. If, for example, an additional assignment is given there will be no time to finish it.

★ ★ Exercise 2: Answer

1. In order to attract private investors to this sector of the accommodation industry, it is recommended that the Council should encourage the private sector to provide incentives.
2. This practice, then, increases the demand for accommodation.
3. The law should not discriminate between people; it should treat all people as equal.
4. Waverly is one of the smallest municipalities in terms of area in the Sydney Metropolitan Region. However, with a total population of 59,000 in 1986, it was the most densely settled municipality in Sydney.
5. The unions are not asking for more money; they are asking for better working conditions.

★ ★ Exercise 3: Answer

1. Four types of problems have commonly been identified: spelling, punctuation, illegible handwriting and poor paragraphing.
2. In some centres the teaching approach is learner-centred, whereas in other schools it is teacher-centred.
3. Unemployment in Puerto Rico is said to be 10.4 per cent; in Trinidad 14 per cent.
4. This was one of Hall's major achievements; he persuaded his party to carry out a necessary but suicidal reform.
5. Rev. James Watson was reported as saying: 'If there is such a thing as conscience then there are white men in Australia whose consciences must have the lash of scorpions.'

★ ★ Exercise 4: Answer

Dunstan was a man in a hurry during his first two years as Attorney-General but he seems to have slowed down since becoming Premier. In many ways he has been all the more effective for that. His term at the top of the political heap in South Australia has coincided with the greatest change in political alignment ever seen in that State. It could be argued that Dunstan has been the architect of that realignment.

★ ★ Exercise 5: Answer

TEXT 1

The technique has many advantages over conventional bioassays in liquid media: it is simpler; it is not subject to interference by inhibitors that occur naturally in crude sample extracts or result from extraction procedures; and it can be used directly to identify the small amounts of material contained in spots cut out from paper chromatograms.

TEXT 2

Before we talk about varying paragraphs, let's establish what a paragraph is. A paragraph is a group of sentences that conveys a group of connected ideas. The particular way you group ideas is individual; it is part of your individual style. Just remember that the same philosophy about varying sentences applies to varying paragraphs. If your paragraphs don't vary in size and structure, your writing will drag.