

English Grammar Basics

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Effective writing is grammatically correct, consistent, and concise. In addition, the language and syntax contribute to clarity and understanding. This document provides information and guidelines on the following topics:

- [language](#)
- [punctuation](#)
- [numbers](#)
- [acronyms and abbreviations](#)
- [problem words and expressions](#)
- [compound words](#) — spelling and hyphenation

Language

Use clear, precise language. This section provides guidelines on the following topics.

- [jargon](#)
- [syntax](#)

Jargon

If the reader is unfamiliar with a term, or if a term has different meanings to different people, jargon obscures meaning. In those cases, use standard English terms rather than jargon. If you must use a jargon term that may be unclear, define the term with its first usage. However, if a jargon term is commonly used by the intended audience, and if it is more clear and precise than an alternate word or phrase, use the jargon (RAM or ROM, for example).

Syntax

The following problem areas deserve special attention.

- [subject/predicate agreement](#)
- [consistent tense](#)
- [parallel construction](#)

Subject/Predicate Agreement

Generally, problems with subject/predicate agreement arise when the subject is placed far from its predicate, as in the following example.

New information on peripherals, power loads, I/O sections, and read/write channels have been incorporated.

Placing the subject and predicate closer together solves the problem.

New information has been added on peripherals....

Using active voice also solves the problem.

We have added information on peripherals....

A similar problem occurs when a prepositional phrase separates the predicate from the subject.

Each of these items are available.

Since *each* is the subject, the verb must be *is*. In many cases, *each* isn't necessary to the meaning of the sentence, so you can reword the sentence like this.

These items are available.

In some cases, however, *each* is essential to the sentence. You can read the sentence without the prepositional phrase (*of these items*) to be sure the subject and verb are in agreement (*each...is*), or rewrite the sentence without the prepositional phrase.

Each item is available.

Consistent Tense

Unnecessary shifts in tense often arise in writing procedures in which an action causes some result.

When you press enter, the program will assume a value of zero and issues a warning message.

Typically, if you use present tense, your writing is both more concise and less susceptible to errors.

When you press enter, the program assumes a value of zero and issues a warning message.

Parallel Construction

Similar ideas are best presented by similar grammatical constructions. Although errors in this area can occur anywhere, they are especially noticeable in lists. For example,

- *Construction of a widget*
- *Wiring the widget*
- *Test procedures*

should be rewritten:

- *Building a widget*
- *Wiring a widget*
- *Testing a widget*

Punctuation

This is a brief overview of general rules of punctuation. Refer to [Punctuation Basics](#)

— [Commas and Semicolons](#) for more information.

Colons

A colon normally follows a introduction to a formal listing, but is not necessary after every as follows, the following, or similar introductions. A colon must be used when the introduction is an incomplete sentence, but is optional following a complete sentence.

A colon in the middle of a sentence introduces either a brief, informal listing or a clarification of the preceding thought. It is generally incorrect to use a colon following a verb (except follow). And colons are often used incorrectly after prepositions, separating the preposition from its object.

Commas

Use commas to separate elements in a series.

The kit includes the widget, the widget software, and this manual.

Commas are often used incorrectly after subject phrases, separating the subject from the predicate. For example,

Engineers who have completed this course, are eligible for the next one.

should **not** have a comma after the word *course*.

Quotation Marks

Commas and periods go inside quotation marks; semicolons and colons go outside.

Refer to Appendix A, "Widget List," for additional information.

Additional information is located in Appendix A, "Widget List."

Semicolons

The semicolon is most frequently used to combine two independent clauses into a single sentence without using a conjunction.

A batch program can run interactively; an interactive program can run in batch.

It can also be used to combine two independent clauses with certain conjunctive adverbs (e.g., however, therefore, thus).

The team won; however, they are still in second place.

The semicolon is also used to separate elements of a series when those elements

contain embedded commas.

Sales offices are located in Hartford, CT, for the Northeast; Atlanta, GA, for the Southeast; and Dallas, TX, for the West.

Numbers

Spell out these numbers:

- numbers zero to ten
- a number that is the first word of a sentence
- approximate numbers (for example, *More than two hundred people are expected to attend.*)

Use numerals for these numbers:

- numbers greater than ten
- units of time, measurement, and money
- chapter, page, figure, and table numbers
- percentages (for example, 5% not five percent)
- numbers used in a paragraph that also contains numbers stated as numerals

If two numbers appear together in the same phrase, write one as a figure and one as a word (for example, *two 1/2-inch tapes, 500 fifty-character records*).

Acronyms and Abbreviations

Define an acronym the first time it is used. If it is repeated throughout several pages, define it the first time you use it in each page. Spell out the words first, then enclose the acronym in parentheses. Throughout the rest of the page, you can use the acronym alone.

First use:

Using the Test Pattern Development Language (TPDL) commands....

Subsequent uses:

Using the TPDL commands....

Abbreviations are handled much like acronyms. Use only standard abbreviations listed in dictionaries and other references, spell out the term (followed by the abbreviation in parentheses) the first time it is used. You can use the abbreviation alone throughout the rest of the chapter.

Words and Expressions

The definitions in this section should help clarify the proper use of the following

"problem" words and expressions.

- [affect, effect](#)
- [amount, number](#)
- [assure, ensure, insure](#)
- [comprise, compose, include](#)
- [e.g., i.e.](#)
- [etc.](#)
- [example, sample](#)
- [less, fewer](#)
- [that, which](#)

affect, effect

Generally, *affect* is used as a verb (meaning "to have an influence on") and *effect*, as a noun (meaning "result" or "outcome").

*This utility affects the overall design.
To see the effect of this utility, check the*

Effect can also be used as a verb (meaning "to bring about"). It is used correctly as a verb in the following example.

The new manager has effected major changes in the department.

amount, number

Use *amount* to refer to things that can be measured — things involving a unified mass. Use *number* to refer to things that can be counted as individual units.

*...the amount of the bill...
...the number of programs...*

assure, ensure, insure

Assure means "to impart trust." Only a person can assure or be assured.

Ensure means "to make sure or certain."

Insure means, primarily, "to safeguard or indemnify against a loss." These three words are used correctly in the following example.

I assure you that I will ensure that your car is insured.

comprise, compose, include

Comprise means "to contain or encompass." A body comprises, or "contains," its elements. The elements constitute or "make up," the body. *Comprise* cannot be used in the passive voice (Saying "The book is comprised of five chapters" is incorrect. The chapters do not comprise the book; rather, the book comprises the parts.)

Compose means "to make; to form." Elements compose ("make up") a body. *Compose* may be used in the passive: "The Union is composed of fifty states."

Include refers to a part of the content. Unlike *comprise*, it suggests that only some of the components are mentioned.

The book includes three chapters on linguistics.

means that there are more than three chapters, but three of them are on linguistics. However,

The book comprises three chapters on linguistics.

means that there are only three chapters, and all three of them are on linguistics.

e.g., i.e.

These two Latin abbreviations are often confused.

The abbreviation *e.g.* (*exempli gratia*, meaning "for example") introduces one or more examples. The abbreviation *i.e.* (*id est*, meaning "that is") introduces an explanation of a previous statement. Use the English phrases (*for example* and *that is*) without hesitation. They are **always** acceptable in text.

If you prefer to use the abbreviations, do **not** begin a sentence with them. Type them in lowercase letters, separated by periods, preceded by a comma, semicolon, or parenthesis, and followed by a comma, as shown here:

, e.g.,
; e.g.,
(e.g.,
, i.e.,
; i.e.,
(i.e.,

etc.

Use this abbreviation (for *et cetera*, meaning "and others") sparingly. Generally, you can simply list items separated by commas, without a conjunction, instead of using *etc.*

(schematic capture, design verification, netlisting)

example, sample

Example is always a noun. *Sample* can be a noun, adjective, or verb.

Figure 2-1 is an example of the report.
Figure 2-1. Sample Report

less, fewer

Less is a measure of amount. *Fewer* is a measure of number.

The new product requires less maintenance because it has

fewer parts.
This product has less fat and fewer calories.

that, which

That introduces something essential to the meaning of the sentence; the clause defines or limits what precedes it.

Which introduces something that can be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence; the clause is descriptive, but not essential to the meaning of the sentence. *Which* clauses are enclosed in commas.

We selected the computer that achieved the best performance on the benchmark test.

We selected the XYZ computer, which achieved the best performance on the benchmark test.

Compound Words — Spelling and Hyphenation

Open compounds are word combinations that denote a single concept but are spelled as separate words. These compounds are typically used as nouns.

data processing, computer application

Closed compounds are closely related to open compounds. These word combinations were originally spelled as separate words, but are now spelled as one word.

online, benchmark, filename

Word combinations that modify or describe another word are generally hyphenated.

user-supplied logic
cell-based design

Do **not** use a hyphen to combine a second word to an adverb that ends in *ly*.

highly regarded person

Prefixes are generally joined to their root words without a hyphen. However, use a hyphen in the following circumstances.

- If omitting the hyphen yields a word that could be confused with another word.

re-cover, recover
re-mark, remark

- If omitting the hyphen yields a word with a doubled vowel, making the word difficult to read. There are exceptions (like *reentr*) to this exception: check

your dictionary.

de-emphasize, semi-independent

- If the prefix is attached to a proper noun or numeral.

non-IBM, pre-1980

- If the prefix is a single letter joined to a word.

X-shaped, I-beam

- If the prefix is ex or self.

ex-customer, self-employed

References:

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