

Appendix 1 Language Difficulties and Types of Error

The purpose of this Appendix is to examine some of the common types of error that are often made by students when writing formal or academic English. The first step is to be aware that an error has been made; the second step is to recognise

or identify it; the third step is to correct it. Of course, it is far better not to make an error in the first place! If you look carefully at what follows it should help you *not* to make some of the mistakes in your writing.

Section 1 Errors and Causes

A Some common causes of error

- 1 Probably the biggest cause of error is literal translation from your own language into English. If you try to translate word for word you will make mistakes.

For example, in Nepali, the sentence *John said nothing* would be rendered as (translated) *John nothing spoke*. It is easy to see that when translating into English the word order and the sentence structure could cause difficulties, and also the vocabulary.

Advice: Try to remember English sentence patterns when you read them; then use them in your writing.

- 2 If you write in long complex sentences, it is easier to make mistakes: the sentence becomes complicated and the subject and verb tenses may become confused.

Advice: Try to write in fairly short sentences (perhaps at most about three lines) until you are confident that there are no mistakes.

- 3 If you try to write English in the same way as you speak it, you will probably write in the wrong style. Spoken language is often informal. Academic writing is normally rather formal.

Advice: Try to recognise a formal style of writing and use it. Do not mix it with an informal style.

B Some common types of error

- 1 Subject and verb agreement (i.e. concord); particularly singular and plural subject with the correct verb form. E.g. they *were* (not they *was*). (See Section 2 below.)
- 2 The use of *s* at the end of the third person singular, present simple tense (i.e. stem + *s*). E.g. the writer *says* (not the writer *say*).
- 3 – *This* + singular noun, *these* + plural noun;
– *Other* and *another* differences.

- 4 Uncountable nouns are often wrongly used (as if they were countable nouns). E.g. *This information is useful* (not *These informations are useful*).
- 5 When the impersonal *It* or *There* subject should be used, it is often wrongly omitted. E.g. *It seems we should . . .* (not *Seems that we . . .*).
- 6 Verb tense uses are confused, particularly the present continuous (used too frequently) and present simple. E.g. *I work* in the library every day (not *I am working* in . . .).
- 7 The formation of some verb forms is not known, particularly the present passive. The formation of the past tenses of irregular verbs also causes difficulty.
- 8 *No* and *not* differences in negative structures.
- 9 The formation and use of some of the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs are not known. (See Unit 8, and below.)
- 10 The correct use of
 - some prepositions: (e.g. *in, on, at, for*)
 - the articles: *a/an/the*
 - relative pronouns: *who, which*
 - possessive adjectives: *his, her, their*
- 11 Confusion over the choice of vocabulary, e.g. *make* and *do*. The choice of synonyms will often depend on usage (or context) as much as on meaning. (See Section 4 below.)
- 12 Spelling mistakes. (See Unit 18.)

C Practice in areas of language difficulty

- 1 Each time you do an exercise and practise the language you should be as accurate as possible: copy carefully.
- 2 If you make a mistake, learn from it. Try not to repeat an error.
- 3 Do not forget the seemingly simple or obvious elements of writing, e.g. write as legibly or clearly as possible. Remember, if someone cannot read your writing, it does not matter how accurate it is!
- 4 Check your punctuation: if you have used a full-stop (.) it indicates the end of a sentence and immediately after it the next sentence will begin with a capital letter.
- 5 Do not mix capital letters and small letters within a word: it gives the impression that you are uneducated!
- 6 Remember to divide your writing into paragraphs: it makes it easier to read and creates a better impression.

Section 2

Subject-Verb Concord

- A The *s* is often wrongly forgotten in the 3rd person singular of the present tense, i.e. the stem + *s*, e.g. not The student *attend* the language course and he *study* hard. It should be *attends* and *studies*.
- B Frequently *has* and *have* are used wrongly, e.g. not The course *have* taught me a lot. Here it should be *has*.
- C Mistakes are also made with *is* and *are*, and *was* and *were*, e.g. not Jose and Eduardo *is* from Mexico; not Some students *was* late this morning. It should be *are* and *were*.
- D Another common mistake is with *do* and *does*, especially in negative sentences, e.g. not He *don't* study Chemistry, he *study* Physics. It should be *doesn't* (or *does not*) *study* and *studies*.

You must be careful to look at the subject of the verb, decide if it is singular or plural and then choose the appropriate verb form: Stem + *s*, *has*, *is*, *was* or *does*, if singular (all end in *s*). Stem, *have*, *are*, *were* or *do*, if plural.

Other points to note

- E Look at this sentence:
The number of students on the course is less than last year.
Here the subject is *the number of students on the course* but the main word is *number*. Therefore the verb must be singular *is*. Often a mistake is made by using the plural verb (*are* in this case) because of the influence of a plural noun (*students*).
- F Some nouns which are grammatically singular may be followed by a plural verb form. These are often called collective nouns. E.g. The government *have* taken an important decision. The England football team *were* beaten by Italy. The class *have* a test on Friday.
With collective nouns in their singular form it is usually possible to use either a singular verb or a plural verb. Therefore, The government *has* taken . . . The England football team *was* beaten . . . The class *has* a test . . .
- G Learn by heart these examples:
- 1 Almost always singular
(i.e. verb in singular form): *news, information, music, mathematics, phonetics, the United States, advice, evidence, accommodation, equipment.*
e.g. The news *was* very good.
 - 2 Usually singular
aid, research
e.g. His research *is* progressing very well.
 - 3 Always plural
(i.e. verb in plural form): *people, police, cattle.*
e.g. The police *are* doing their best to control the traffic.

- 4 Singular and plural
(i.e. these words do not change; but the verb may be singular or plural according to the meaning): *means, series, species, sheep, aircraft*.
e.g. The series of experiments that he conducted *was* very successful.
Several species of butterfly *are* in danger of dying out.

Section 3 Comparisons

A Formation

- 1 The regular comparative and superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs are formed as follows:
- by adding the endings *-er* and *-est* to words with one syllable.
 - by placing the words *more* and *most* in front of words with three or more syllables.

word length	adjective or adverb	comparative	superlative
one syllable	new soon	newer sooner	newest soonest
three syllables or more	easily convenient	more easily more convenient	most easily most convenient

- words with two syllables may be like a or b above:
 - Generally they will add the ending *-er* and *-est* if they end in:
 - y* or *-ly* e.g. *funny* (*funnier, funniest*); *friendly* (*friendlier, friendliest*)
 - But adverbs ending in *-ly* take *more* and *most*.
e.g. *quickly* (*more quickly, most quickly*)
 - ow* e.g. *narrow* (*narrower, narrowest*)
 - le* e.g. *able* (*abler, ablest*)
 - er* e.g. *clever* (*cleverer, cleverest*)
 - Most of the remaining words take *more* and *most*:
e.g. *careful* (*more careful, most careful*)
 - Some common two-syllable adjectives can have either type of comparison: common, handsome, polite, quiet.
e.g. polite *politer* *politest*
 more polite *most polite*

2 Irregular comparison is made by:

- a a small group of very frequent adjectives:

e.g. bad	<i>worse</i>	<i>worst</i>
far	<i>further/farther</i>	<i>furthest/farthest</i>
good	<i>better</i>	<i>best</i>
many	<i>more</i>	<i>most</i>

- b a small group of adverbs:

e.g. badly	<i>worse</i>	<i>worst</i>
little	<i>less</i>	<i>least</i>
much	<i>more</i>	<i>most</i>

B Use in sentence construction

There are a number of constructions using comparisons. Some of the commonest ones are shown below in sentences:

- 1 Showing equivalence (i.e. the same)
 - a Ann is *as* clever *as* Tom.
 - b This book is *the same* price *as* that one.
 - c There are *as many* students in this room *as* in the other one.
 - d There is *as much* liquid in the first test-tube *as* in the second.
- 2 Showing non-equivalence (i.e. not the same)
 - a The medical library is *not as/so* big *as* the science library.
 - b John's essay was longer *than* Peter's.
 - c However, Peter's essay was *more* carefully written *than* John's and contained *fewer* mistakes (*than* John's).
 - d There were *not as many* students in the seminar *as* at the lecture.
 - e The student did *not* do *as much* homework *as* his teacher had hoped.
 - f This problem is *less* difficult *than* the previous one.
- 3 Showing one item compared with a number (i.e. the superlative)
 - a He scored *the highest* marks in the annual examination.
 - b *The most* convenient time for him to see his tutor was in the early afternoon.
 - c Some economists find that *the least* interesting part of their subject is statistics.
- 4 Showing parallel increase (i.e. two comparatives)

The bigger the problem (was), *the more* interesting he found it.

Note: A common mistake is to confuse and mix some of the constructions, producing, for example, the wrong construction *more . . . as* which should be *more . . . than*.

See the list of recommended books for further explanation and practice at the end of this Appendix.

Section 4 Vocabulary

Vocabulary is a very large subject. It really requires a book to itself; in other words a dictionary. In fact, a good monolingual English dictionary is the best book that you, as a student of English, can buy. Recommended ones, specially compiled for the student of English are listed in Unit 8. A dictionary of synonyms (or a thesaurus) can also be helpful, if used with care.

Often a wrong word is used because a wrong choice has been made between similar words or synonyms. The choice of synonyms will often depend on usage, or context, as much as on meaning. A good English dictionary will give examples of usage or context that will help you to choose the correct word.

Some attention is given below to a few words that frequently cause difficulty to students. Read the information and examples carefully.

A Verbs

1 *Make* and *Do*

The basic meanings are:

make: construct, produce, form, shape, create.

do: perform, carry out, act.

However, there are large lists of idiomatic expressions containing these two verbs; they can be found in the dictionaries referred to above.

Look at these examples.

Considerable progress has been *made* with the experiment.

He found that he could not *do* the research.

He *made* a number of attempts to finish the work.

She had some difficulty in *doing* her homework.

Many discoveries have been *made* this century.

2 *Rise*, *Arise*, *Raise*, *Increase*

rise: (intransitive, i.e. without direct object) go up, get up, go higher.

e.g. Prices continue to *rise*.

The cost of living index *rose* by 10% last year.

The sun usually *rises* at 5 a.m. in the summer.

Note: *Rise* is also a noun, meaning increase.

e.g. There was a *rise* in prices caused by a *rise* in wages.

arise: (intransitive) come into existence, appear.

e.g. A new problem has *arisen* in the college.

An unexpected difficulty *arose* when he was analysing the results.

raise: (transitive, i.e. takes a direct object) lift up, make higher, cause to rise.

e.g. Bus fares were *raised* three times last year.

The landlord said he is going to *raise* the rent.

Also – to bring up for discussion or attention.

e.g. He *raised* a new point in the seminar.

– to manage to get; obtain.

e.g. He *raised* a loan. He tried to *raise* money for a new project.

increase: (transitive and intransitive) make or become greater in size, number, degree, etc.

e.g. The Chancellor of the Exchequer *increased* the tax on petrol in his last Budget.

The population has *increased* by 200,000 to a total of 50 million.

Note: 1 *Increase* can sometimes be used instead of *raise* or *rise*.

e.g. In the above two sentences *raised* could be used in the first and *has risen* in the second.

2 *Increase* is also a noun, meaning rise. e.g. There was a steady *increase* in population.

B Pairs of words often confused

NOUN	VERB	NOUN	ADJECTIVE
practice	practise	politics	political
advice	advise	mathematics	mathematical
effect	affect	statistics	statistical
choice	choose	logic	logical
		economics	economic
ADJECTIVE	VERB		
loose	lose		

Note: 1. The adjective *economical* relates to saving money, not to the economy.
2. Two adjectives are often confused, partly because of spelling mistakes: *later* (*late*, *later*, *latest*) and *latter* (the second of two things already mentioned; contrasted with *former*, meaning the first of two).

C British words and American equivalents

Occasionally confusion can be caused by being unaware that there are some differences between British and American words. Good English learners' dictionaries give the American equivalents of the British words. Some examples are given below.

UK	USA	UK	USA
aeroplane	airplane	rubbish	garbage/trash
autumn	fall	tap	faucet
chemist's	drugstore	timetable	schedule
city/town		tin	can
centre	downtown	torch	flashlight
flat	apartment	trousers	pants
full stop	period	vest	undershirt
pavement	sidewalk	waistcoat	vest
rubber	eraser		

Section 5 Recommended Books

The following books are recommended for further explanation and practice:

- Longman Dictionary of Common Errors* N.D. Turton & J.B. Heaton (Longman).
- Right Word Wrong Word* L.G. Alexander (Longman).
- An A-Z of English Grammar and Usage* G. Leech (Longman).
- Practical English Usage* M. Swan (Oxford University Press).
- English Grammar in Use* R. Murphy (Cambridge University Press).
- Oxford Practice Grammar* J. Eastwood (Oxford University Press).
- A University Grammar of English* R. Quirk & S. Greenbaum (Longman).
- A Communicative Grammar of English* G. Leech & J. Svartvik (Longman).
- An Introduction to English Grammar* S. Greenbaum (Longman).
- Longman Essential Activator* (Longman).