

**Common writing
mistakes of non-native
English speakers**

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When you are preparing a piece of writing, one of the main aims is to get your message across clearly and accurately. This can prove to be a challenge when writing in your native tongue but even more so when you are trying to do it in a foreign language. As someone who studied French and Spanish at university several years ago, I have personal experience of this challenge.

Even if you have studied the English language for many years, it is still easy to make a few mistakes. Here are some of the most common writing mistakes that non-native English speakers make and how you can fix them. To be honest, sometimes even native speakers of English make these mistakes too!

Appropriate use of articles

Articles are those short words placed before a noun such as 'a', 'an' and 'the' to indicate whether it relates to something specific or not. It's easy to mix them up but hopefully the explanation below will clarify the situation.

Indefinite articles

The indefinite articles are 'a' and 'an'. They refer to non-specific nouns. You use 'a' before a noun beginning with a consonant and use 'an' for nouns beginning with a vowel. The indefinite article only occurs with singular nouns.

e.g. I would like a phone.

e.g. Please can you buy me an apple?

Definite article

'The' is a definite article. It refers to something that is specific.

e.g. The man's hat is blue.

To confuse matters even more, it is not always necessary to use any articles at all.

You don't need to use articles in the following instances:

- When you write about things in general.

e.g. I like dogs.

Here, the writer implies that they like any dog in general and not a specific type of dog.

- When you write about non-count nouns.

e.g. I love dancing.

- When you write about specific days, holidays, geography, companies or languages.

e.g. I have bought a tree for Christmas.

e.g. I live in England.

e.g. I use Twitter every day.

e.g. I speak French.

- When you write about places, locations and streets.

e.g. I live on Chestnut Avenue.

However, some specific places do need an article such as ‘the bank’ and ‘the airport’.

- When you write about sports and physical activities.

e.g. I love to play football.

- When there is a noun + number.

e.g. The train leaves from platform 9.

- When you write about academic subjects.

e.g. I enjoy maths class.

Verb tenses

Verb tenses are important as they explain to the reader when an action is taking place. If you use the incorrect tense, or you are not consistent within your text, you can easily confuse your readers.

So be consistent with your use of verb tenses. For example, if you are writing about an action that has happened, make sure you use a past tense. If you are writing about an action that is taking place right now, use a present tense. You should only change tenses when it is suitable such as when there is a change in the time period.

It may seem like there are so many tenses to choose from but hopefully the information on the next few pages will simplify things a little.

PAST TENSES

Simple	A past habit or a completed action. e.g. I went to Spain in 1990.
Continuous	An uncompleted actions of the past (with or without a time reference). e.g. Everyone was laughing.
	Persistent habits of the past. e.g. They were always arguing.
Perfect	A completed action of the past that happened before another event took place. e.g. After he had finished work, he went to the cinema.
Perfect Continuous	An action in the past that began before a certain point in the past and continued up until that time. e.g. She had been working in the supermarket for two years when it closed down.

PRESENT TENSES

Simple

Habits or general truth.

e.g. I play tennis.

A future event on a certain date.

e.g. The plane arrives at 4pm on Friday.

Continuous

An action going on at the time of speaking.

e.g. They are playing football in the park.

A temporary action which may not be happening at the time of speaking.

e.g. Ben is driving his Mum's car while his own car is in the garage.

Perfect

A past action which is not defined by a time of occurrence.

e.g. John isn't at home. I think he has gone to the cinema.

An action which started in the past and has continued up until now.

e.g. She has lived in the town for five years.

Perfect Continuous

An action which started at some point in the past and may not be complete.

e.g. He has been living in London since he left university.

FUTURE TENSES

Simple	An action, condition or circumstance which hasn't taken place yet. e.g. I will go shopping tomorrow.
Continuous	It expresses what will be going on at some time in the future. e.g. I will be eating lunch when she arrives.
Perfect	An action that will be complete before another event takes place. e.g. I will have played tennis before it rains.
Perfect Continuous	An action that will have happened for some time and will not be complete yet at a certain point in the future. e.g. I will have been watching TV for two hours when you arrive.

Agreement between subjects and verbs

Subjects and verbs must agree in number. If the subject is singular, the verb must be singular and if the subject is plural, the verb must be plural.

e.g. He goes to school.

e.g. They go to the park.

Unfortunately, it isn't always that straightforward.

- If two subjects are joined by the word 'and' they become plural and must have a plural verb form.

e.g. John and Jane go to school.

- If the subject is separated from the verb by phrases such as ‘with’, ‘as well as’, ‘together with’ and ‘along with’, the subject is still deemed to be singular and must have a singular verb form.

e.g. The teacher, along with the pupils, is expected to arrive at midday.

- Collective nouns may be singular or plural depending on their meaning. Collective nouns usually refer to a group of people. Often you need to determine whether you are thinking about a group of people as a whole or a collection of individuals before you can choose whether to use the singular or plural form of the verb.

e.g. The team who are playing this weekend includes two new signings.

e.g. My family, who have lived in Spain all their lives, are determined to remain here.

- Collective nouns such as ‘people’ and corporate bodies like the BBC are singular and take a singular verb form.

e.g. The BBC has appointed a new controller for Radio 4.

- The verb is singular if the subject is a single indefinite pronoun such as ‘each’, ‘no one’, ‘everyone’, ‘nobody’.

e.g. Everyone was at the beach yesterday.

- The verb is plural if the subject is a plural indefinite pronoun such as ‘several’, ‘few’, ‘both’ or ‘many’.

e.g. Several trees have fallen due to the high winds.

- Subjects joined by words such as ‘or/not’, ‘either/or’, ‘neither/nor’, ‘not only/but also’ take the verb that agrees with the subject closest to it.

e.g. Neither my brother nor my sister goes to university.

Prepositions

Prepositions might seem like simple words but they can certainly cause problems for students learning English. The job of a preposition is to express the relationship between two words in a sentence. Words such as 'to', 'in', 'of' and 'on' are prepositions and there are many more. It's easy to use the wrong preposition as there are so many exemptions to the general rules. Often native English speakers just seem to instinctively know which is the most appropriate preposition in a given situation. The more you immerse yourself in the English language, the easier it will be. In the meantime, here are some errors that are frequently made.

Arrive at vs. arrive in or arrive to

If you are talking about coming from somewhere such as a city, country or another place, you should use 'at'.

e.g. When we arrived at the restaurant, we saw my brother there.

On/in with months and dates

For days and dates you should always use 'on'.

e.g. I am travelling to Spain on Monday.

However, if you are not talking about a specific date and want to describe a month in general, you should use 'in'.

e.g. My daughter started school in September.

Night

You should use the preposition 'at' when describing events that happen at night.

e.g. I like to go to the pub at night.

For + periods of time

To describe periods of time, you usually use 'for'.

e.g. I have been living in Spain for ten years.

However, if you want to describe a specific period of time, you use 'since'.

e.g. I have lived in Spain since January.

Married to

If you want to explain someone's marital status, you should use 'to'.

e.g. Jane is married to John.

In conclusion

I hope this guide has helped you to improve your writing skills in English. English is a complex language and there are probably many other issues that may cause confusion. Please do let me know if you would like help with any other English grammar topics.

Please also feel free to contact me if you would like me to proofread a piece of writing.

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