

# *20 English Writing Rules and Tips to Instantly Improve Your Writing*

English writing skills are super important for learners.

Whether you need to pass a test, complete an assignment or write an email to a co-worker, knowing how to say what you want to say in print is vital.

Sometimes you can get away with small mistakes when speaking, but they'll be easily spotted in writing. 3

And while mistakes are a normal part of learning, you can avoid many of the most common ones by following some key rules.

Read on to discover 20 English writing rules and tips to improve your skills and communicate more clearly when you write.

## Important English Writing Rules

Learn the following English grammar rules and you'll get a solid foundation upon which you can start building your writing skills.

### **Capitalise the right words**

This may sound silly, but capitalisation is actually important!

You wouldn't write your name as *mary* or *john*, but *Mary* or *John*. It's just as important to write *Sunday* and not *sunday*, and to use a capital letter after a period.

#### **For example:**

There are some capitalisation errors in this sentence:

*i will go to the beach on monday. do you want to come?*

This is the correct version:

*I will go to the beach on Monday. Do you want to come?*

### **Add commas and periods where needed**

You don't need to know everything about English punctuation from the very beginning, but you should at least master the use of commas and periods early on.

Periods are generally used to end a sentence, while commas are trickier. There are many reasons to use a comma but one basic rule is that commas are used when you would naturally pause in your sentence. For example, you would write: *First, learn English punctuation rules.*

There's also a special kind of comma called the Oxford comma. This comma appears before the last item in a series of three or more items. If you follow the AP style, you won't use it, whereas if you follow any other writing style like the Chicago style, you will.

#### **For example:**

In this example, there are no commas, so you would run out of breath by the end! It also never finishes since there's no punctuation mark at the end:

*First I went shopping then I was getting tired so I decided to go home It was an adventure*

The following sentence is much easier to follow thanks to the punctuation marks:

*First, I went shopping. Then, I was getting tired so I decided to go home. It was an adventure!*

Here's an example using the Oxford comma (Chicago style):

*I need two pens, three notebooks, and one pencil.*

And here's one without the comma (AP style):

*I need two pens, three notebooks and one pencil.*

## Use the right tense

Learning English tenses is one of the first steps in our language-learning journey.

This isn't *random* (by chance). Tenses are at the core of English grammar and without them, we wouldn't be able to distinguish the past, the present and the future. Tenses allow us to communicate our ideas properly and say what happened when.

When you write, pay special attention to the tenses you use and make sure your choices are correct in the context.

### For example:

This may be an example of the historical present, but it sounds weird since 1907 already passed:

*He dies in 1907.*

This sentence sounds more natural:

*He died in 1907.*

## Make sure your subject and verb agree

Subject-verb agreement is a rule that says that the subject and the verb of a sentence always have to agree. That is, they have to be in the same person and number.

You can't use the third person *plays* if the subject is *you*, just as you can't use *have been* when the subject is *my mom*.

### For example:

These two sentences are incorrect:

*The price of books **are** on the rise.*

*Mary **go** to school every day.*

While these are correct:

*The price of books **is** on the rise.* ("Price" is the subject.)

*Mary **goes** to school every day.* ("Mary" is the subject.)

## Put adjectives and adverbs in the right order

Adjectives can be a nightmare for some English learners, especially when they have to use more than one category of them in the same sentence.

While it's important to know the order of adjectives, the very first rule you need to remember is that **adjectives come before the noun in English.**

### For example:

This sentence would sound very wrong to a native English speaker:

*I have bought a car white.*

This sentence is correct:

*I have bought a white car.*

This also applies when you have several adjectives in the sentence. For example, here's an incorrect sentence:

*I bought a kitchen table beautiful long and wooden last week.*

And here it is, corrected:

*I bought a beautiful long wooden kitchen table last week.*

English adverbs tend to be easier to master, although they also have their own order and rules.

Two important rules you should remember are that **adverbs precede the adjective they modify and they normally come after the verb they modify**, especially if they're adverbs of manner and place.

**For example:**

These are two incorrect sentences:

*Peter beautifully sings.*

*He is an intelligent very boy.*

And here are the correct versions:

*Peter sings beautifully.*

*He is a very intelligent boy.*

## **Make writing more natural with connectors**

Connectors, also called linking words, are words we use to link or connect phrases and sentences. Connectors are useful because they make our writing more fluid and natural.

When you don't use connectors, your text tends to have short sentences. This is how children normally speak or write. When you add connectors to your work, you get closer to how native English speakers talk or write.

**Example:**

No native speaker would talk or write like this:

*The car was very beautiful. I couldn't afford it. I asked my brother for money. I bought the car.*

This is much better writing:

*The car was beautiful but I couldn't afford it, so I asked my brother for money and bought it anyway.*

## **Know the difference between *who* and *whom***

Knowing the difference between *who* and *whom* and using them correctly can make a great difference in your writing. Even native English speakers often mix these two up!

A basic trick you can use to figure out which one to use is to try to replace "who" or "whom" with a pronoun. If you can say "he/she/they" in the sentence, use *who*. If you can use "him/her/them" instead, use *whom*.

**For example:**

Here are some examples of the correct and incorrect ways to use *who* and *whom*:

*To who do you want to speak?* (Incorrect)

*Who do you want to speak to?* (Correct, informal)

*To whom do you want to speak?* (Correct, formal)

*There were 50 students, 12 of who were from Spain.* (Incorrect)

*There were 50 students, 12 of whom were from Spain.* (Correct)

## **Don't mix up *few*, *a few*, *fewer* / *little*, *a little* and *less***

To learn how and when to use English quantifiers, you should pay special attention whenever you see or hear one of them used.

The basic rule is to use *few* when you're talking about something you can count (*cats, TV shows, dollars*), and use *less* when you're talking about something uncountable (*love, snow, money*).

### **For example:**

This is incorrect:

*I have a little friends.*

Since you can count how many friends you have, you would use *few*:

*I have a few friends.*

Here's another incorrect example:

*I couldn't care fewer.*

You can't count *caring*, so you should use *less* here:

*I couldn't care less.*

## **Avoid double negation**

In order to write (and speak) well in English, you should always keep negation and double negation to a minimum whenever possible.

Remember that you shouldn't use two negatives to make a positive, so watch out for tricky negative combinations. There are exceptions (which you'll see in the example below), but this is a good general rule to follow.

Also, try to avoid a double negation if you can easily replace it with an affirmative sentence.

### **For example:**

This sentence lost me after the first few words, Are you driving to the movie theater or not!?

*I don't know no way of not driving to the movie theater.* (Definitely incorrect)

Here are two other ways you can say the same sentence, but this time without using so many negatives:

*I don't know how to drive to the movie theater.* (Correct)

*I don't know any way of driving to the movie theater.* (Correct)

The following sentence is technically correct, but only used when you want to react to someone saying someone is impolite.

*He is not impolite.*

This sentence is correct and neutral in meaning:

*He is polite.*

## **Use indirect speech and questions when needed**

The rules of indirect speech can be difficult at first, but a good piece of writing will include it when necessary. This is another of those topics that can mean the difference between sounding like a beginner and a proficient writer.

### **Example:**

Here are two incorrect examples:

*He wanted to know what time is it?*

*They asked me "how do you know."*

And here are the correct versions of the same sentences:

*He wanted to know what time it was.*

*They asked me how I knew.*

## **Avoid the passive voice in informal writing**

Using the English passive voice will be necessary from time to time, especially if you have to write formally and impersonally. But if you're just writing a school assignment or a simple email to a friend, try to avoid the passive voice whenever you can.

### **For example:**

This sentence is grammatically correct but the way it's phrased is very odd and unnatural:

*Hi, John! The book I was told about by you has been found by me.*

This is a much more natural way to say the same thing:

*Hi, John! I have found the book you told me about!*

## **Useful English Writing Tips**

### **Watch out for homonyms**

Homonyms are words that sound or are spelled identically but have different meanings.

Take the word *spring*, for example. You may already know this is the name of one of the seasons, but did you know this word can also mean a piece of *coiled* (twisted) metal?

Getting to know the most common English homonyms and how they're used will have a huge positive *impact* (influence, effect) on your writing. Teachers pay special attention to this, and they'll lower your mark if you use the wrong words.

### **For example:**

Many words in this sentence are confusing homonyms:

*I sea you new that cereal killer, two.*

Here is the same sentence, written correctly:

*I see you knew that serial killer, too.*

## Be specific

Try to be specific and write exactly what you need to write. Choose one topic and don't add information that isn't necessary or is *off-topic* (not related to the topic).

If you see that three or more sentences in a paragraph aren't necessary, start writing that paragraph *from scratch* (from the beginning) again.

### For example:

This is grammatically correct but very difficult to follow:

*Writing is important to improve your English. My friend loves writing. He also reads and teaches little kids. Writing can help you become a better speaker of English, too.*

Here's a better option:

*Practicing your writing skills will improve all your English language skills. I know that because my friend, who teaches little kids, told me.*

## Break up long sentences

With time, you'll learn how to use English connectors like a professional writer, and you'll recognise the difference between a sentence that's acceptably long or unnecessarily long.

You should also avoid using too many short sentences together. This makes your writing sound *choppy* (uneven and not smooth).

### For example:

This sentence is grammatically correct, but it can give you a headache:

*Writing is an art that you, my dear reader, should master if you really want to convey your message properly and make the reader feel that what you have to say is not only interesting but also necessary for them to read and analyze during the process of reading it.*

This sentence is a much better option:

*Writing is an art you should master if you want to communicate properly. Your goal is to make the reader interested in what you write and give them something to think about.*

## Only use words you understand

This tip is quite *self-explanatory* (it explains itself, it's obvious). If you don't know the meaning of a word or expression, choose a different word or look up its meaning before you use it.

Trying to pretend you're a walking dictionary doesn't always give you good results, especially if you make a mistake and use the wrong word or spell it incorrectly.

### For example:

Two words in this sentence are incorrect:

*Irregardless of whether you like it or not, the book entitled "Alice in Wonderland" is a classic.*

You might think the previous sentence sounds smart, but *entitled* means "to believe that you have the right to something." It doesn't mean "having the title." And *irregardless* is not even a word!

You can rewrite that sentence like this instead:

*Whether you like it or not, the book titled "Alice in Wonderland" is a classic.*

## Be careful of false friends

False friends are words that seem to mean one thing but mean something totally different. Depending on your native language, some words can be false friends for you or not.

One of the most famous cases of this is the Spanish word *embarazada*, which sounds like it means “embarrassed” in English but really means “pregnant.”

### For example:

Have a look at some examples. Here’s the Spanish example I mentioned above:

*Mary is embarrassed.* (What you may say.)

*Mary is pregnant.* (What you wanted to say.)

Here’s an example from Polish:

*He works in a fabric.* (What you may say. This is also a Spanish false friend!)

*He works in a factory.* (What you wanted to say.)

Finally, let’s see a French example:

*I love this pain!* (You may, but I am sure you wanted to say the next sentence.)

*I love this bread!*

## Answer “the five W” question words

The five W’s are [the main question words in English](#): *What, where, when, who* and *why*. Although it doesn’t start with W, you can also include *how* in this list.

If you’re writing an assignment, try to answer at least a few of these five questions, unless the topic is so specific that it wouldn’t make sense to do it.

For example, you don’t need to answer all five of them if you’re describing your best friend or talking about the weather, but you can if you’re describing your last holidays.

### For example:

This example is okay, but it sounds odd because it includes too many unimportant details:

*My dog’s name is Kira. She was born in 2016 in Poland. She was born because their parents had puppies.*

In this example, all five W’s are answered because they add important information:

*Last year I went to France on holiday because I wanted to visit the Eiffel Tower. I spent the whole month of July there with my girlfriend, and we bought a lot of presents for our friends.*

## Don’t overuse the “to be” verbs

“[To be](#)” is obviously a crucial and necessary English verb. It allows us to make descriptions, talk about age, occupations, relationships, etc. However, sometimes we use it a bit too much, especially when beginning to write in English.

There are several tricks you can use to reduce the number of unnecessary “to be” verbs in your writing. The most common one is making the person or thing doing the action the subject of the sentence.

### For example:

This one is correct but it can be improved:

*She is very pretty. She is a nurse devoted to her patients.*

This is a much better option:

*The pretty nurse devotes herself to her patients.*

## **Avoid ambiguity**

If you write a sentence that can be interpreted in two or more different ways, or it isn't clear what it's referring to, it's an ambiguous sentence. You should try to avoid ambiguity so that the person reading what you write has a clear understanding of your writing.

There are many ways in which you can avoid being ambiguous, but one of the easiest ones is just to make sure the pronouns you use are clear in the context.

### **For example:**

In the following sentence, it's difficult to tell who was a good student, Mary or Sue:

*Mary told Sue that she was a good student.*

This next sentence makes it much clearer that Mary is the good student:

*Mary described herself to Sue as a good student.*

## **Revise what you've written... twice!**

This tip might be obvious to many of you. When you finish writing, you have to revise your work and look for spelling, grammar and vocabulary errors.

Check whether sentences are too long or too short or if there's any ambiguity in the text that can be easily solved. Look for false friends, homonyms and any other word you may have used incorrectly.

Take a break and give it a final second reading before sending, printing, or handing in your work.

### **For example:**

Here's what a sentence might look like before proofreading:

*In conclusion, thre are thre ways too fry an egg.*

Here's a much cleaner sentence, after editing out the mistakes:

*In conclusion, there are three ways to fry an egg.*

Now that you're familiar with some important English writing rules and tips, you can take your writing to the next level.

Reading will also help you improve your writing skills because you'll learn new vocabulary and grammar structures that you can use when you write.

Remember that practice is super important when it comes to writing, so write often!