

Academic Writing and Grammar for Students



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 **SAGE Study Skills**

Academic Writing and Grammar for Students

2nd Edition

Alex Osmond

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About the Author



Photo credit: Maria Wald

Alex Osmond has worked as an Academic Skills Adviser and Project Manager at two UK institutions: Cardiff Metropolitan University and Brunel University. As part of these roles, he has provided guidance to students, both online and face-to-face, focusing on the development of their academic writing. Students have been consistent in praising the advice he has given, which has often translated directly into higher grades. Alex has also taught a wide variety of skills sessions across specific degree programmes. He has worked to develop online resources aimed at improving academic writing, and also co-managed the Study Skills Collection at Brunel University Library. A module that Alex helped devise at Cardiff Metropolitan was nominated for a Times Higher Education Award in Outstanding Student Support. Alex has focused on the English language in his studies and work for several years, and his approach highlights the importance of independent learning in students developing a well-rounded set of skills.



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Common Mistakes and How to Deal With Them

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should:

- be aware of, and recognise examples of, common mistakes that appear in academic writing
- understand how to avoid these mistakes.

This chapter deals with a variety of issues and mistakes that I have seen many times in essays. Some readers might recognise many of the issues here. Others might notice only a few areas for improvement in their own work.

Some of these issues are actual *mistakes*; sentences that contain them are grammatically wrong. Others, however, are not ‘mistakes’ in the sense of being incorrect; they might damage your writing in some other way.

Some of the issues have complex origins, some much simpler; some are easy to track down, while others are tougher to spot.

This chapter also includes some ‘quick tips’. These are smaller bits of advice, dealing with easy-to-solve issues.

As you read through this section, remember that these issues are problematic because they hinder your writing’s clarity, simplicity and effectiveness; and, therefore, your meaning. By now, you should realise how important these qualities are.

It is important to have an idea of context. If you’ve made one of the more minor mistakes, just once, you might not be penalised. However, if they appear throughout your work, or your essay includes a range of recurring



mistakes, you are damaging your chances of getting the best marks. The more substantial issues might affect your mark in themselves.

I've identified these issues based on the experience I have had, and my colleagues have had, reading many kinds of assignments from a wide range of subjects. View these pages not as a warning, but as an opportunity.

You have the chance to learn where you can improve your writing, by avoiding the more common issues that appear in essays. Avoiding these will allow you to focus on developing your writing as a whole.

As you read, start to think about the nature of your own writing. Think about how likely it is that the issues discussed here are appearing in your essays. You might recognise some of them immediately.

Note that some of the mistakes identified here have already been mentioned in the book. Even so, I wanted all these common issues to appear together, to give you an idea of the kinds of things to start looking for as you write.

Additionally, I think I should repeat here the fact that this book does not stick to all the conventions of academic writing that I recommend. This might occasionally be noticeable in this chapter.

Mixed constructions

A 'mixed construction' will be grammatically incorrect. *How* it is incorrect will depend on the sentence itself. However, mixed constructions of various types appear commonly in essays.

Mixed constructions are sentences that are made up of various parts that do not connect properly grammatically. The different parts of the sentence might be linked by the same topic, or they might *almost* link in a grammatical way – but the result is a sentence that is incorrect, at best; at worst, mixed constructions can be potentially confusing to a reader.

If you follow the subject–verb–object rules discussed earlier, and ensure your verbs and pronouns agree, and construct sentences carefully, you shouldn't have too much of a problem with mixed constructions.

Most commonly, a mixed construction is a sentence that begins by saying one thing, and then shifts into a different kind of sentence. Let's look at some examples:

- ✗ Local government has had a variety of responsibilities in the UK however a successful result for the main political parties.
- ✗ In this experiment, quantities of several corrosive chemicals that are needed.
- ✗ Although the play's two main characters seem to be redeemed, but the outlook can be considered bleak.

Read the sentences aloud; they certainly *sound* wrong, somehow, don't they?
I will examine them in order.

- ✘ Local government has had a variety of responsibilities in the UK however a successful result for the main political parties.

Here, the subject–verb–object arrangement operates correctly up to ‘in the UK’. After that, there’s a problem. The word ‘however’ does not properly connect the second part of the sentence with the first, which is, really, just a modified noun (‘successful result’ with some additional information). A verb of some kind is missing. ‘However’ does not seem to be the right conjunction in any case. Additionally, though, the problem with meaning is deeper here. It’s not quite clear what the writer is actually saying. Determining this would be the first step in rectifying the problem. I will rewrite the sentence as if the point is that British local governments always have a certain set of responsibilities, regardless of the party in power in Parliament:

- ✓ Local government has a variety of responsibilities, which exist regardless of which political party is in power.

In the second example, from a chemistry essay, something is missing:

- ✘ In this experiment, quantities of several corrosive chemicals that are needed.

There is the sense that the sentence needs *more*. The reason for this is the word ‘that’ towards the end of the sentence. If the writer is simply pointing out the need for several corrosive chemicals, not much needs to be done: the sentence begins with a modifier, ‘in this experiment’. A subject–verb agreement follows: the subject/noun is ‘quantities of several corrosive chemicals’; the verb is ‘are needed’. This is a rare sentence with no object. It is clear that the word ‘that’ performs no function. To solve this problem, I will remove ‘that’ and make the first part of the sentence the object:

- ✓ Quantities of several corrosive chemicals are needed in this experiment.

If the word ‘that’ appears because the writer wants to do *more* with the sentence, by suggesting perhaps that the need for corrosive chemicals leads to *something*

else, then the sentence is more confusing. Again, the writer has to think through what they mean. Something like the following would be possible, of course:

- ✓ The quantities of corrosive chemicals that are needed in this experiment are substantial enough that specific certified laboratories can carry out this work.

Sometimes, as you can see, mixed constructions are mistakes that come from hurried writing. If you proofread carefully, you are likely to find them. Some of them, though, highlight a problem with unclear meaning. This, again, proves the importance of a common theme of this book – being sure of what you want to tell the reader.

The third, final example comes from a theatre studies essay:

- ✗ Although the play's two main characters seem to be redeemed, but the outlook can be considered bleak.

The problem here is that the word 'although' sets up the sentence's second half to provide a contradictory phrase – which it does – and the word 'but' has also been used. Using the two conjunctions has made the sentence confusing and incorrect. Removing either one solves the problem:

- ✓ Although the play's two main characters seem to be redeemed, the outlook can be considered bleak.
- ✓ The play's two main characters seem to be redeemed, but the outlook can be considered bleak.

There are, potentially, subtle differences of emphasis in the two different options, but ultimately, both sentences say the same thing.

Key point

Two of the three mixed constructions I've written are underlined in green by my word processor's spell-checking and grammar tool. The software can tell that the sentence is grammatically incorrect, but *it can't tell me why*. Additionally, the first mixed construction is not marked as incorrect at all. This highlights the limitations of technology; the next chapter will discuss this idea a little more.

Reading sentences aloud is a good way to find mixed constructions. They will sound wrong, even if you don't know why at first. In general, conjunctions and missing verbs are common causes of the problem. Think through what you want to say, and write it in a calm and unhurried way.

Dangling modifiers

As you become more confident in your writing, you'll naturally (and correctly) try to vary your sentence structure more. As you do so, of course, you need to take care to check your writing is still grammatically correct.

Dangling modifiers are a common problem. They occur in sentences that begin with a modifying phrase before the traditional subject–verb–object arrangement. Quite often these modifying phrases involve a verb ending in 'ing', or some other descriptive phrase made up of several words.

Here are two *correct* examples of this kind of sentence:

- ✓ Feeling pressurised by declining ratings, the executives changed the television network's advertising policy.
- ✓ Originally developed to enhance efficiency in local health authorities, the new database system played an important role in directly improving the experiences of service users.

These examples are correct, because the first modifying phrase modifies the subject of the next part of the sentence, which is the noun that appears *directly after the comma* (with the relevant articles, and in the second example, the adjective 'new').

Where, then, do people go wrong?

In a way, this issue is similar to the previously discussed 'mixed constructions': these sentences are problematic when the modifier does not clearly apply to the subject of the sentence. That is, the modifier 'dangles'. As with mixed constructions, it might be that parts of the sentence have been attached to each other, and all contribute to the same point, but do not work together grammatically.

The next two sentences are versions of the previous examples, rewritten incorrectly to demonstrate the 'dangling modifiers' problem:

- ✗ Feeling pressurised by declining ratings, the television network's advertising policy was adjusted by the executives.
- ✗ Originally developed to enhance efficiency in local health authorities, an important role emerged for the new database system, which would directly improve the experiences of the service users.

This issue can be quite difficult to detect. The two sentences above, if scanned (read quickly), might seem appropriate – particularly the second one.

As I've explained, when a sentence begins with a modifier, the modifier applies to the subject of the sentence, which will appear *at the beginning* of the second part of the sentence (after the comma). Applying this logic to the examples above reveals problems.

To test these sentences in your own work, take the first noun after the comma (the subject of the sentence), and place it *in front of* the modifier. Does your sentence make sense? Take a look at this step applied to the incorrect examples:

- ✗ **Feeling pressurised by declining ratings, the television network's advertising policy** was adjusted by the executives.
- ✗ The television network's advertising policy, feeling pressurised by declining ratings ...

The bold text above includes the two parts I have reordered. Clearly, the 'advertising policy' cannot 'feel pressurised' by anything, given that it will be an inanimate text or legal document!

Doing the same exercise with the original, correct version of the sentence makes it clear that the *executives* (that is, people in charge of the television network) were 'feeling pressurised' – which makes perfect sense:

- ✓ **Feeling pressurised by declining ratings, the executives** changed the television network's advertising policy.
- ✓ The executives, feeling pressurised by declining ratings ...

The second sentence, while longer, poses the same problem:

- ✗ **Originally developed to enhance efficiency in local health authorities, an important role** emerged for the new database system, which would directly improve the experiences of the service users.
- ✗ An important role, originally developed to enhance efficiency in local health authorities ...

You can see that the *role* of the new database system cannot have been 'developed as a way to enhance efficiency'. That is what the new database

system was developed for. Alternatively, the *role* of the database system might have been to enhance efficiency. It is very strange, however, to suggest that the role was developed to enhance efficiency.

The correct example makes things clearer:

- ✓ **Originally developed to enhance efficiency in local health authorities, the new database system** played an important role in directly improving the experiences of service users.
- ✓ The new database system, originally developed to enhance ...

The key is to look out for any sentences you've written that begins with a modifier, separated from the main sentence by a comma. As you've seen, the modifier might contain a verb ending in 'ing', but not necessarily.

I'll show you one more incorrect example, and then a range of correct sentences written this way. This should give you a better idea of what they look like, and your skill in finding them will improve.

The following sentence, beginning with a dangling modifier, comes from an essay discussing the work and views of a historian:

- ✗ Writing about the later stages of the Cold War, the reader notices a more realist tone developing in Gottfried's analyses of, and conclusions surrounding, Western foreign policy.

Again, pair the modifying phrase with the *first noun* appearing in the second part of the sentence:

- ✓ The reader, writing about the later stages of the Cold War ...

You can see here that a hurriedly written sentence, beginning with a dangling modifier, has ended up meaning something noticeably unusual. Read grammatically, the sentence suggests that Gottfried's *readers* have written about the Cold War. How can readers detect Gottfried's views in the text that they have, seemingly, written and *are reading*? The dangling modifier here has resulted in a sentence that defies logic!

To solve this problem, make sure that the point you need to make is clear to you. I know that in this example, *Gottfried* is doing the 'writing about the later stages of the Cold War'.

As such, I need to write a sentence that begins:

- ✓ Writing about the later stages of the Cold War, Gottfried ...

Alternatively, I could change the modifier:

- ✓ Reading Gottfried's works on the later stages of the Cold War, the reader ...

The problem with this second option is the repetition of 'read'; I could adjust further:

- ✓ Investigating Gottfried's conclusions about the later stages of the Cold War, the reader ...

There are many possible options. For the sake of simplicity, I will complete a sentence based on the first solution: keeping 'Gottfried' as the subject of the sentence. Focusing on the historian I am writing about seems more appropriate than shifting my assignment's focus to the vague collection of 'readers'.

As always, when solving this problem, express your point simply and clearly. I might end up with something like this:

- ✓ Writing about the later stages of the Cold War, Gottfried develops a more realist tone as he analyses and draws conclusions from Western foreign policy.

In my improved example, I've made some changes beyond fixing the dangling modifier. I've emphasised verbs more than nouns to make the sentence seem more active: instead of the noun 'analysis', I've used the verb 'analyse'. Similarly, the noun 'conclusions surrounding' has become the verb 'draws conclusions from'.

Finally, rather than the 'realist tone' developing, I've used the more active formulation: 'Gottfried develops a more realist tone'. This keeps Gottfried as the subject, rather than the 'realist tone' itself, retaining the close focus on the historian I am analysing.

To conclude, here are several example sentences that *correctly* begin with modifiers:

- ✓ Having discussed the available treatment options, the physiotherapist and patient agreed upon a four-week regimen of various exercises.
- ✓ Subjected to increased academic interest over the past twenty years, project management, in its current range of forms, has been reinvigorated.
- ✓ Its script subsequently embellished by two co-authors, Cranston's fourth film marks a shift into less comedic territory.

Using 'It has been said that ...'

As you've read in this book, and in the books on your reading lists, referencing appropriately and correctly, based on the research that you've done, is a *crucial* part of writing essays. In referencing, you have a system that enables you to incorporate the work of others into your own, and to do so in a way that is obvious and honest.

Because of this, if there is a point in your essay where your reader thinks you *could* or *should* have referenced, and you have not, you have a problem developing. Similarly, giving the vague impression that someone, at some point, *might* have written something that you're now going to use in your essay, is unacceptable. Referencing is clear, explicit and transparent.

The most common problematic phrases in this context aren't a problem in themselves. However, they pose a problem if they are not combined with adequate referencing, or if they are deliberately used to reinforce a point that is your own, and not anybody else's.

These common examples appear in sentences like the following:

- ✗ **It has been suggested that** the second episode of this popular television series represented the situation in Iraq.
- ✗ Although the stigma associated with AIDS sufferers has been considerably reduced, **it is said that** the illness still has negative connotations for many members of the public.
- ✗ Because the immediate practical benefits of high-cost, long-lasting physics research projects are often unclear, **the point has been raised that** substantial government investment in such projects might not have much support.

These sentences are grammatically correct, make clear points and are suitably academic in style. Yet, written as they are in an essay, they are going to cause huge problems.

Each one *immediately* raises a question in the reader's mind: 'Who suggested that?'; 'Who said that?'; 'Who raised that point?'

There are several reasons for this mistake being made. One is that the author wants to make a point, but is (correctly) trying to avoid the first person in making it. To give it enough authority, a third-person statement like 'it has been suggested that' is chosen. Although the first person should be avoided, as you've learned, there is a deeper problem here: a problem with confidence. The next section of this chapter deals with this issue in particular.

The second reason, then, can be attributed to laziness or vagueness. As a student is frantically typing an essay mere hours from the deadline, they might remember a fantastic and important point from one of their lectures over the past year. Alternatively, they might think back to something that struck them from last night's pile of notes, journal articles, handouts and books.

In this scenario, the author *knows* that someone else has come up with an idea, or made a point (in the previous scenario, the author was making their own point), but can't remember who it is, or when it was made.

If this is the case, and you can't (or won't) find the information you need to reference a point, *you can't include it in your essay*. For some reason, sometimes people conclude that the phrase 'it has been suggested that ...' is sufficient, and the reader will happily accept that a point has been made and has reinforcement behind it. This is not the case, however; that's exactly what referencing is for.

Another scenario involves the essay author trying, perhaps, to come up with some arguments that oppose the ones they have made in a previous section. They think of one, and then think something like, 'someone *must* have thought a similar thing at some point' and use the 'it has been said that ...' or a similar phrase. In this situation, the writer knows they are making a point of their own, but is trying to give the impression it has been made by others.

There are two main options here: first, the student can include the point they are making, but as their own (again, the next section of this chapter is relevant here). They might decide, however, that this particular argument or point *needs* some reinforcement. They could, then, take a second approach: *deliberately* research the topic to see if this particular argument has been made.

Whether it has or not will affect what goes into the essay: if nobody has argued a particular point, the author could include it as their own. Alternatively, the author could include it as their own and detail why an argument might *not* have been made. If a point *has* been argued, the author has successfully carried out some deliberate, careful research that will

probably have provided a range of material to write about. (Of course, if nobody has argued a particular point, the author may decide it is not worth making as a point of their own; this is fine, as long as the author thinks through the decision.)

Importantly, though, in either case, the author of the essay is using language, and using (or not using) referencing in an honest, clear way.

Key point

Another phrase commonly used in this manner is ‘it has been argued that ...’.

In conclusion, then, do not use phrases like ‘it has been suggested that’ unless you can prove that they are true – that is, reference them. To clarify, the following sentence, reworked from one of the above examples, would be appropriate (providing the references are accurate, of course!):

- ✓ Although the stigma associated with AIDS sufferers has been considerably reduced, **it is said that** the illness still has negative connotations for many members of the public (Wilkins, 2002; Shapiro, 2008).

If you cannot prove that the phrase is true, you as the writer need to decide whether to research the point (and then decide how or whether to include it, based on what you discover), to discard it, or to *confidently make the point your own*.

Using ‘I think/I feel ...’

Chapter 1 made clear the importance of being objective in academic writing. One convention that contributes to objectivity is avoiding the first person; academic writing should almost always be written in the third person.

Although following that convention will mean you’re not in danger of making this mistake, I wanted to highlight it because it comes from a common problem with confidence in one’s writing. A lack of confidence in our own work, especially as we are just starting our studies, is understandable. However, you don’t want your writing to betray this.

Key point

Note that an earlier chapter discussed ‘hedging’. ‘Hedging’ means deliberately writing to show that you cannot be sure of a particular conclusion; that is, being deliberately cautious. Effective hedging actually demonstrates confidence in how solid your arguments are. As such, do not confuse ‘hedging’ with writing that lacks confidence.

There is a tendency among students, in assignments that otherwise follow the main academic conventions, to occasionally write a sentence like the one in bold, below. The extract is from an essay on the ethical and medical issues surrounding human medicine trials.

✘ Crocker and Ryan’s work was pivotal in revealing the problem of human medical testing (1998). Although the subject had previously been raised in fiction, often to create tension or horror (Crichton, 1969; Cook, 1990), Crocker and Ryan presented an accessible, scholarly paper that highlighted the number of problematic trials that had been conducted. When a medical trial ended in the high-profile, widely reported organ failure of the patients (*Daily Mail*, 2006; Ward, 2006), yet more popular attention was focused on the subject. **I believe that the Western public as a whole, having been exposed to these sources, is comfortable enough with the medical trial as a concept to engage with it in a transparent, scientific debate.**

The extract is well-written, clear, appropriately referenced and academically acceptable – *except for the sentence in bold*.

One problem, on the surface, is the fact that phrases like ‘I believe that ...’, ‘I feel that ...’, ‘In my opinion ...’ are not necessary in academic writing. Here is the same paragraph with the phrase removed:

✓ Crocker and Ryan’s work was pivotal in revealing the problem of human medical testing (1998). Although the subject had previously been raised in fiction, often to create tension or horror (Crichton, 1969; Cook, 1990), Crocker and Ryan presented an accessible, scholarly paper that highlighted the number of problematic trials that had been conducted. When a medical trial ended in the high-profile, widely reported organ failure of the patients (*Daily Mail*, 2006; Ward, 2006), yet more popular attention was focused on the subject. **The Western public as a whole, having been exposed to these sources, is comfortable enough with the medical trial as a concept to engage with it in a transparent, scientific debate.**

Referencing has been used to demonstrate to the reader what has come from other sources. The last sentence, with no references, *must* be an argument that the author of the essay is making. The fact that it is clearly a conclusion drawing on the evidence in the previous sentences helps a great deal, but even if it were the first sentence in the paragraph, the reader would make the same assumption.

This idea came up in the referencing chapter: your work should always involve references that lead to your own conclusions and points. Unreferenced sentences will be read as your conclusions and points. There is no problem here.

Why, then, do these phrases ('I feel', 'I think', etc.) appear so often, even when students know not to use the first person 'I'?

The use of such phrases points to a lack of confidence.

This lack of confidence might be a *broad* one, very common when you are just starting out on a degree. This is often phrased as the question, 'Well, how can *I* include my own views among the points made by these *academics* and *experts*?' While it is understandable that you might have this worry, you need to get rid of it as quickly as you can. The reason that academic conventions, and referencing and critical thinking, are so important is that they allow you to present your evidence, come to your own conclusions and get involved in the academic debate around a subject by giving all this to the reader.

Remove these kinds of phrases and work at making your writing effective and your references appropriate and correct.

Alternatively, you might lack confidence *in this particular point*. If you have been happily writing your essay, and find that you have included one of these phrases – when you understand that you shouldn't – then actually examine the point you're making. Perhaps it does need a rethink.

Perhaps, instead, you need to 'hedge'; that is, be honest with the reader that your conclusion is tentative. This is *not* the same as telling the reader 'this point is my own; it doesn't belong to an expert, and you should be aware of that'. The reader knows this. Instead, you are saying, 'You're already aware that this point is mine, because it isn't referenced. I am making this point based on the evidence I have, which I've done my best to share with you, though I am being honest in that it *might be possible* to draw a different conclusion.'

Finally, then, here is the same example, but with some hedging language used instead of the 'I think' phrase:

- ✓ Crocker and Ryan's work was pivotal in revealing the problem of human medical testing (1998). Although the subject had previously been raised in fiction, often to create tension or horror (Crichton, 1969; Cook, 1990), Crocker and Ryan presented an accessible, scholarly paper that highlighted the number of problematic

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trials that had been conducted. When a medical trial ended in the high-profile, widely reported organ failure of the patients (*Daily Mail*, 2006; Ward, 2006), yet more popular attention was focused on the subject. The Western public as a whole, having been exposed to these sources, **seems** comfortable enough with the medical trial as a *concept* to, **perhaps**, engage with it in a transparent, scientific debate.

The broad point here is that unreferenced points will (correctly) be read as your own work.

Do not feel that you cannot include your own points in your work. Ensure that you are comfortable enough with each point you make, and that you have presented the evidence that led you to make the point. Finally, ‘hedge’ where necessary.

Quick tip: affect or effect?

The words ‘affect’ and ‘effect’ are often confused. In general, ‘affect’ is used as a verb, while ‘effect’ is used as a noun. The following two sentences are correct:

- ✓ The treatment failed **to affect** the patient, whose condition worsened.
- ✓ The treatment had no **effect** on the patient, whose condition worsened.

Simply determine how you are using the word – whether it is an action (verb) or thing (noun). To remember this, remember that a verb is an action word. Action begins with ‘a’: ‘affect’ is the action.

Avoiding the word ‘interesting’

This issue has nothing to do with grammar or academic conventions. Based on my experience looking at essays, the word ‘interesting’ should be avoided. It seems to cause potential problems, rather than lead to effective writing.

Try not to describe anything as ‘interesting’. One problem is that if you call something interesting, your reader might suspect that you don’t consider the rest of your work interesting! It is also quite a weak and overused word that does not actually mean much. (Remember, too, the advice in this book about excessive and unnecessary description in general.)

Plenty of alternative words exist. Below, I've demonstrated some sentences in which you might be tempted to include the word 'interesting', and then listed some other options:

- ✘ It is interesting that, in his final interview, Robertson did not mention the ongoing financial crisis, a topic that had permeated so powerfully into his latest poems.
- ✘ The two translations of this ancient Japanese text are almost identical, but the 1973 version, interestingly, uses the word 'right-mindedness' instead of 'righteousness'.

Alternatives include:

- ✓ It is worth noting ... /It is worth pointing out ...
- ✓ ... notably ...

Another different approach would be to shift the focus from pointing out that something is worth noting, to explaining *why* something is worth noting. You can link this to the larger point that you are making. In the box, you'll see one of the example sentences rewritten with this idea in mind:

- ✓ In his final interview, Robertson did not mention the ongoing financial crisis, a topic that had permeated so powerfully into his latest poems. This fact could support Willis' claim that the author was 'no longer so open about the intended meaning behind his work' (2010). The author himself once wrote that 'the reader plays the most important part of all' (Robertson, 2004). Alternatively, a more extreme conclusion, posited reluctantly by Browne (2010), suggests that Robertson's mental illnesses were, at this time, increasing in severity.

This seems rather a long extract – a whole paragraph now – when you consider that I only used it to replace calling something 'interesting'. However, if something is so noteworthy that you need to point it out, it probably is quite an important point to develop. In academic writing, you shouldn't point something out as being interesting in passing, or as a kind of 'add on'. Everything you write builds towards answering the essay question, or fulfilling the assignment brief. Logically, then, if you think you find something 'interesting', it is either interesting enough to merit full exploration, or not interesting enough to merit even a mention.

Quick tip: important ideas

The word ‘interesting’ appeared in my last sentence, which leads neatly on to this next tip. Using words such as ‘interesting’, ‘crucial’ or ‘important’ can cause a problem.

Here is another example:

- ✘ It is crucial to understand the context of NASA at the time of the Cold War.

Don’t label anything as ‘important’ or ‘crucial’ without explaining *why* it is so important. If you call a topic, idea, event or text important and don’t tell the reader why, they will have certain worries and questions.

They might think that you have gathered from your research, or vaguely remember from a lecture, that an idea is important; you haven’t, though, grasped the topic enough to understand the importance of it.

Alternatively, they might worry that they are missing out on key information, because you haven’t explained the reasons that a topic is particularly important.

Poor presentation of tables and graphs

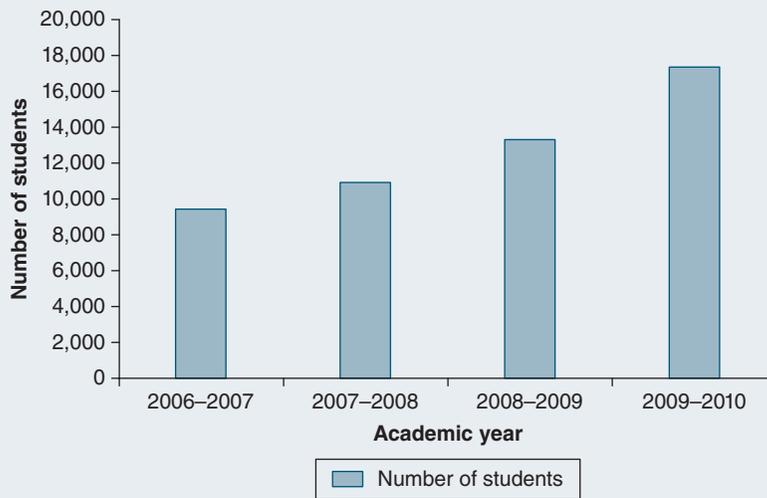
This issue really impacts on the impression an audience will have of your work, especially if it happens consistently throughout a longer piece of work (like a research project).

If you are going to include a graph or table which you have not produced, treat it like any other kind of reference (a quotation, a paraphrase, and so on). This means ensuring it is clear and readable, it is cited correctly in your text, and its relevance and importance is made obvious.

This last point means that not only do we use high-quality scans or images of the appropriate graphs (as opposed to poor-quality photocopies) and include not only a title (taken from the original source if possible), but also an appropriate and correct citation at the bottom right of the image (or footnote the title, if that’s more consistent with your referencing style). Finally, make sure that you explain the diagram’s presence in your text, in the same way that you’d expand on or develop a quotation.

Doing this might range from including phrases as short and simple as, ‘As diagram A, above, shows, the corporation’s profits increased during the first half of the year ...’, to an entire paragraph explaining some of the key points or statistics visible in the diagram or graph. By doing this, you’ll be showing that, as with your quoting and paraphrasing, you are using your research in a considered way, rather than just copying-and-pasting visual information and using that to make a point in, and by, itself.

Here is an example of a chart I have created, with the paragraph that follows it.



As the chart above shows, the number of students at Fordingham University has increased substantially each academic year since 2006. It is also apparent that the size of the increase has grown, particularly between academic years 2008–2009 and 2009–2010. This essay will examine the various factors that played a role in these increases.

Quick tip: practise or practice?

'Practise' and 'practice' are often confused or misused. 'Practise' is a *verb*, while 'practice' is the *noun*. Knowing what function the word fulfils in a sentence will determine which spelling to use. To recall this, I remember that 'ice' is a noun, so 'practice', ending with the noun, is also a noun.

As such, these two example sentences are appropriate:

- ✓ Most journal articles published in the field of occupational therapy are written by established professionals who **have been practising** for years.
- ✓ **The practice** of occupational therapy is inseparable from the theory behind it.

Cases like this demonstrate how important it is to have an understanding of basic English grammar – if you weren't aware of the difference between a noun and a verb, you might never get this right!

Comma splicing

‘Comma splicing’ refers to separating grammatically complete sentences with a comma. This is one of the most common mistakes made in many kinds of writing, but its prevalence does not make it any more acceptable! While comma splicing might seem like a minor issue, it shares a danger common to some of the other mistakes discussed in this chapter: if it happens too frequently throughout your work or a section of it, your essay might end up practically unreadable, becoming a series of overlong sentences and unclear points glued together with commas.

Below is an example of a comma splice (so it is an incorrect sentence). Bear in mind that these sentences are cited in the Harvard style, but you could just as easily include a footnote, or number, depending on the referencing style you use. Once you have studied some examples, some ways around the problem can be discussed.

- ✘ De Tocqueville’s investigation of American democracy (1835/1840) remains relevant today, many politics courses still list it as core reading.

If we separate this example into two parts, using the comma as our point of division, we get these:

De Tocqueville’s investigation of American democracy (1835/1840) remains relevant today

and

many politics courses still list it as core reading

Read these sentences aloud, separately, and it should be fairly obvious that they are complete. This means that we cannot separate them just by using a comma. Here is a similar sentence that is not an example of comma splicing:

- ✓ Although De Tocqueville’s investigation of American democracy (1835/1840) is nearly as old as America itself, many politics courses still list it as core reading.

Separating this in the same way gives us:

Although De Tocqueville’s investigation of American democracy (1835/1840) is nearly as old as America itself

and

many politics courses still list it as core reading

The second part is identical, and it is still complete. The first part of the sentence, however, includes the conjunction ‘although’. Read the first part of that sentence aloud and you will hear that something is quite obviously missing. That ‘although’ means that we need a second idea.

You may now have an idea about the rule to avoid comma splicing: at least one of the clauses, on either side of the comma, has to be incomplete when read by itself. This rule also applies to sentences made up of three or more clauses. Here is another comma splice:

- ✘ De Tocqueville investigated American democracy (1835/1840), his book is still widely considered relevant, the text is still listed as core reading on a wide range of politics courses.

This splits into three parts:

De Tocqueville investigated American democracy (1835/1840)

his book is still widely considered relevant

the text is still listed as core reading on a wide range of politics courses

Each of these, too, is complete; reading them aloud proves this immediately. We can ignore the citation, which might look different if another referencing style was being used. In any case, no referencing system would interfere with the grammatical sense of the sentence. Again, a slightly different example might not involve a comma splice:

- ✓ Nearly two hundred years after it was first published, De Tocqueville’s (1835/1840) investigation of American democracy is still considered relevant, a fact emphasised by its inclusion as core reading in a wide range of politics courses.

Separating this into three parts gives us:

Nearly two hundred years after it was first published

De Tocqueville’s (1835/1840) investigation of American democracy is still considered relevant

a fact emphasised by its inclusion as core reading on a wide range of politics courses

The second, or middle, clause is complete, and would work as a stand-alone sentence. The first, however, is a modifying clause that adds information (in this case, a rough date of publication) to another. As such, it does not make sense without the clause it is providing more detail about. As usual, reading this clause aloud will prove this point straight away. The same applies to the third clause. It is grammatically incomplete because it lacks a suitably formed verb, and if we wrote this as a sentence by itself, it might not be clear what ‘a fact’ refers to (here it is obvious because, again, the clause is modifying the previous one by telling us more about it).

This reaffirms the rule: at least one of the clauses in a sentence that separates clauses with commas must be grammatically incomplete – that is, unable to stand as a sentence on its own.

Your sentence might have six clauses, and this rule still applies; in fact, as I have already mentioned, comma splicing becomes a much more problematic issue when it is used to link clause after clause, resulting in confusing, breathless paragraphs. Reading your work aloud is a very simple way of tracking this down. If you have any doubt as to whether a sentence is comma spliced, separate it into its constituent clauses in a separate word processor document, or on a separate sheet of paper. Double-check that at least one could not stand by itself.

Take a look at this example paragraph:

- ✘ De Tocqueville investigated American democracy (1835/1840), his book is still widely considered relevant, the text is still listed as core reading on a wide range of politics courses. He wanted to see why republican representative democracy worked so well in the USA, he travelled round the states, he compared the American system to that of his native France, there are positive and negative aspects in what he found during this journey.

This paragraph ‘sounds’ very rushed and breathless, and it gives the impression that the author is stringing potentially valid, relevant points together without pausing to think about style or variety; the continued comma splicing actually makes the sentence very difficult to read. **This is important because** the presence of one paragraph like this in an essay means that there are likely to be others. As you can imagine, having to read whole sections of an essay written in this way would likely not have the best effect on your tutor’s mood.

Identifying this very common problem is the first step; now we have to solve it.

Quite often the simple conjunctions ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘then’ and ‘because’ can be used, if they are appropriate.

For example, instead of the comma-spliced sentence:

- ✘ De Tocqueville's investigation of American democracy was published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840, it is still relevant today.

we could use:

- ✓ De Tocqueville's investigation of American democracy was published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840 but it is still relevant today.

Here, 'but' is actually providing another layer of meaning – it is surprising or striking that De Tocqueville's book is still relevant, while, perhaps, most other books written as long ago as the 1800s might not be considered useful now.

Sometimes we can use a semi-colon. There is often confusion as to what a semi-colon actually does; as mentioned in Chapter 3, this is its most common purpose. It is used to join grammatically complete statements where the writer feels the link is so important that using two separate sentences would damage it (my sentence at the bottom of the previous page, 'Identifying this very common problem ...' is actually an example of this). When it comes to rectifying comma-spliced sentences, using semi-colons instead of separate sentences, occasionally, is a good way of varying our writing style. See the example below:

- ✓ De Tocqueville does detail many negative points inherent in the American system of representative democracy; he discusses at some length what he sees as a lack of intellectual freedom in the country (1835/1840).

Finally, we can use separate sentences. This is often the simplest option, and it is better to write a paragraph of short separate sentences that make your points and express your ideas clearly than to write one filled with overlong, convoluted sentences and comma splicing.

Here, the writer has separated a comma-spliced sentence into three separate ones:

- ✓ One of De Tocqueville's aims was to compare and contrast the American system with that of France. His book had a lasting impact on intellectuals in both countries. It is also striking that many of the predictions he made about the future of American democracy would come true.

As you learn to develop your writing, you'll find that using a combination of the different solutions (joining some sentences together, using some semi-colons, splitting some spliced sentences into separate ones) will make your writing more varied and thus more interesting for the reader.

Quick tip: beginning a sentence with a number

There are various rules around writing numbers. These can vary from subject to subject; as you can imagine, different subjects use numbers to different extents.

Here is one rule that is the same across subjects: if you start a sentence with a number, you *must* write it, not use digits.

The following sentence would not be acceptable:

- ✗ 2 of the patients in the control group recovered at the same pace as those taking the experimental drug treatment.

Note that this rule applies even with large numbers. So, if you have a very large number you don't want to write in full, for example:

- ✗ Ten thousand, six hundred and sixty-seven is the total number of deaths resulting from extreme weather in the country, according to figures released by the government.

rearrange your sentence so it does not appear at the beginning, like so:

- ✓ The government has released figures that estimate the number of deaths resulting from extreme weather in the country at 10,667.

Quick tip: conjunctions

Don't begin sentences with conjunctions (see Chapter 2 on basic grammar for a list, but the common ones are: 'and', 'but' and 'or'). Sometimes doing this is acceptable in other forms of writing, but it should be avoided in assignments.

However, be careful not to confuse conjunctions with *prepositions* (a much longer list, including: 'with', 'to', 'under', 'above', and many more).

Using 'of' instead of 'have'

This mistake is common in speech as well as writing; it probably appears in essays because the writers of the essays make the mistake when they talk.

In Chapter 2, the verb as a grammatical device was defined and discussed. Chapter 3 examined the issue of verb 'tense'. Several tenses involve the word 'have' followed by an appropriate form of a particular verb.

The mistake being discussed here involves the word 'have' being incorrectly replaced by 'of'. 'Of' is not a verb, and as such, does not appropriately create a certain tense when it is paired with a verb. Here are some examples of correct usage:

- ✓ Although the legislation was only passed two years ago, its results, judging by rising grades in Indian primary schools, **have been** encouraging.
- ✓ Until the opening of the Soviet archives, commentators, politicians, historians and journalists could (and many did) warn about the expansionist nature of the Communist regime, but could **not have known** just how expansionist the empire was.
- ✓ Walker was approached by a major film studio interested in adapting his first novel, a full thirty years after the events of the novel are meant to **have taken place**. Walker turned the studio down because they insisted on updating the setting which would '**have been** disastrous' (Walker, 1986: 340).

The following versions of these sentences, then, would be incorrect (but this mistake is so common I would not be surprised if I saw them):

- ✗ Until the opening of the Soviet archives, commentators, politicians, historians and journalists could (and many did) warn about the expansionist nature of the Communist regime, but could **not of known** just how expansionist the empire was.
- ✗ Walker was approached by a major film studio interested in adapting his first novel, a full thirty years after the events of the novel are meant to **of taken place**. Walker turned the studio down because they insisted on updating the setting which would 'have been disastrous' (Walker, 1986: 340).

Note that in the final example, the second use of 'have been' is a *direct quote*, which the essay author could not change. In a way, this would act as a clue to the other mistake!

The most common formation of this mistake seems to be 'would have' and 'could have' (or the negative equivalents 'would not have' or 'could not have') being incorrectly written 'would of' and 'could of'.

'Of' is a preposition that labels a specific relationship between one noun and another; this relationship is often possessive, as it is in the following example:

- ✓ The effects **of** the excesses of Senators like Joe McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee reverberated through American politics, massively straining public confidence in it, for decades. Additionally, as a consequence **of** the later Watergate scandal, faith in the federal government would drop even more.

As you can see, the phrase ‘would of’, for example, has nothing to do with the specific meaning of the word ‘of’, nor is it a correct verb form.

Use your word processor’s ‘find’ tool to track down all your uses of the word ‘of’. (There is another reason to do this, explained in a separate subsection.) Check that it has been used correctly, and is never connected to the verbs ‘would’, ‘could’, ‘should’ or ‘will’, in particular.

If you take care to write your verbs correctly, and think through the appropriate tenses for your sentences, as discussed in Chapter 3, you should not notice this problem at all.

Quick tip: overlong/convoluted sentences

This has already been mentioned, but is such a common mistake that I wanted to highlight it again in this section.

Briefly: if reading a sentence aloud leaves you breathless, it’s too long! Simply break it down into manageable chunks, even if this occasionally leads to some repetition. Similarly, if you have difficulty checking that verbs (for example) agree with the appropriate nouns, because they are so far apart, you might have a problem.

The word ‘of’ and possessive replacements

The ‘possessive’, as well as the letter ‘s’ and the apostrophe that goes with it, were discussed in Chapter 3.

Although this is not a mistake, as such, it’s worth knowing that in *most* cases the word ‘of’ is used to represent the possessive. It can often, therefore, be replaced by the simpler possessive apostrophe and ‘s’.

Here are some examples that show this replacement in action:

The aim of the study was to investigate the effects of long-term steroid abuse by males between the ages of 19 and 27.

The study’s aim was to investigate the effects of long-term steroid abuse by males between the ages of 19 and 27.

One of the objectives **the designers of the game** set out to achieve, starting with **the style of the interface**, was creating a 'truly immersive experience' (Halshaw, 2006: 23).

One of the objectives **the game's designers** set out to achieve, starting with **the interface style**, was creating a 'truly immersive experience' (Halshaw, 2006: 23).

During the early stages of the primary campaign, it was clearly **the intention of Governor Clinton** to prove that he was **a different kind of Democrat**. **The structure of his campaign operation** allowed him to ensure this theme was reinforced at every level.

During the early stages of the primary campaign, it was clearly **Governor Clinton's intention** to prove that he was **a different kind of Democrat**. **His campaign operation's structure** allowed him to ensure this theme was reinforced at every level.

In the last example, one use of the word 'of' ('a different kind of Democrat') has not been changed. The phrase 'a Democrat's different kind' does not make sense. This highlights the fact that it's always up to you as the author to choose whether to make this substitution. Sometimes, as in this example, the replacement doesn't make sense.

In other cases, using the possessive 's' might sound or read strangely; if in doubt, leave the original 'of' in the sentence.

Below are some phrases in which you need to keep the word 'of'. These are just some examples; again, using 'of' is not incorrect. The possessive can be simpler, but cannot always be used instead.

part of the problem ...

several of the ...

many of the ...

some of the ...

one of the important facts from the ...

Finally, I've included a sentence in which I *could* use the possessive, but would choose not to, because the resulting sentence seems a bit strange to me. Rather than change it to a sentence that bothers me in my essay, I've left it as it is.

The shift of the focus in the play from the imprisoned criminals to their guards is a subtle one.

A version with the possessive replaced would look like this:

The focus' shift in the play from the imprisoned criminals to their guards is a subtle one.

The phrase 'focus' shift' looks odd, and sounds odd when read aloud. It seems a bit forced and awkward. As such, replacing 'of' with the simple possessive should be seen as one potential technique available to you when writing. Sometimes it will help streamline your writing. At other times it should not be used.

'Putting things off'

An essay's introduction, or the introductory parts of chapters in a longer assignment, usually does a number of things. The introduction explains the context of a topic, outlines the reader's argument and, crucially, summarises what the essay is going to investigate.

The last of these, explaining the various steps an assignment will take, naturally involves sentences and paragraphs that tell the reader that something *will* be discussed, rather than actually discussing the particular something *now*.

This is appropriate, and readers will expect your introduction to do this. However, when the same phenomenon happens later in a piece of work, it can cause an unusual problem.

Sometimes, in essays, students give the impression of 'putting things off', by explaining what is going to appear in a piece of work, instead of just raising the topic.

Below, you'll see an example of this:

✘ Before discussing the present state of Marxist theory, a definition of Marxism is necessary.

While there is nothing grammatically wrong with this sentence, it is a waste of words that could be put to better use. The author should simply provide the 'necessary' definition, like so:

✓ Marxism can be defined as ...

After a definition has been provided, the author can go on to discuss ‘the present state of Marxist theory’.

The following example is similarly problematic:

- ✘ At this point, some information about the context of the NASA space programme at the time is needed.

The phrase ‘at this point’ means *now*. If some information is needed *now*, provide it now! The author could simply write a clear, simple paragraph detailing the context of the space programme:

- ✓ At the time, the NASA space programme was a complex set of projects, each with distinct aims, budgets and individuals who were involved.

This might strike you as a strange issue, but you’d be surprised how commonly it appears in assignments. After all, nobody *deliberately* decides to delay discussion unnecessarily.

This is just a theory of my own, but I think this happens because, to an author trying to make their work seem ‘academic’, highlighting the fact that you are about to provide an important definition can seem formal, somehow.

Take another look at the example about Marxism. I get the impression that a student, in writing this sentence, might think the sentence says something like this: ‘I am discussing a very important and academic topic, and I understand that it’s very important to define key terms in essays, so I am going to prove that I think this way by telling the reader I’m about to do so.’

The problem with this approach, of course, is that the student is forgetting that simply defining the ‘important and academic topic’ proves the same thing to the reader. In fact, it proves it in a simpler, more effective way.

Again, that is my tentative explanation for why this issue appears; remember, don’t try to be any more formal than necessary. This applies to both the formality of writing style, as well as the over-formal approach of unnecessarily ‘building up’ to a grand topic, which actually just appears as if you are delaying the inevitable.

Bear in mind that if you *do* need to explain why a certain point needs to be made before another one, then it’s appropriate to do so. That is, if you are aware that something needs to be delayed, and *can explain why*, then explain it. This, in fact, would be considered signposting. Consider this revised version of the previous example:

- ✓ In order to understand the part that the NASA space programme played in America's Cold War strategy, it is crucial to understand the context of NASA at the time.

If I were to take out the reason for delaying a discussion, I'd be left with a sentence more like the earlier, problematic ones:

- ✗ It is crucial to understand the context of NASA at the time of the Cold War.

The second version, and the earlier sentences, are examples of an unnecessary kind of signposting: 'I need to give you this important information now. Here is the important information.'

The first version of the NASA sentence, however, makes clear *why* the information is important: 'I need to give you this information *because it helps you understand* what comes next.'

To summarise: do not delay making a point, unless you can explain why you need to. If it is worth writing, it is worth writing now!

Further reading

Some of the books I've mentioned in other chapters deal excellently with what the authors have found to be common mistakes – I've covered the ones I see frequently, but there must be others! In particular, I would look at:

Godfrey, J. (2009) *How to Use Your Reading in Your Essays*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Peck, J. and Coyle, M. (2012) *The Student's Guide to Writing: Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar* (3rd edn). Basingstoke: Palgrave.