

# Basics of Academic Writing

## Addressing Common Language Issues in Academic Writing

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**Date: 24<sup>th</sup> July 2024**



**Undergraduate Diploma in Business  
Administration/ Digital Marketing**

During today's we will tackle the following topics regarding common language issues:

Cohesion

Definite  
Articles

Numbers

Passive and  
Active

Punctuation

Singular  
and Plural

Time  
Markers



# Cohesion

Cohesion means joining a text together with reference words (he, she, theirs, the former) and conjunctions (but, then), so that the whole text is clear and readable. Today we will focus on reference words.

Reference words are used to avoid repetition:

Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) was a fifteenth-century Italian genius who produced only a handful of finished artworks. However, these include the Mona Lisa and the Last Supper, the former perhaps the most famous painting in the world. Although he is remembered mainly as an artist, he was also an innovative engineer, scientist and anatomist. His designs include tanks and flying machines, and although few of these were not built in his lifetime, he is still remembered as the man who saw their possibility.

**Examples of reference words and phrases:**

Pronouns he/she/it/they

Possessive pronouns his/her/hers/its/their/theirs

Object pronouns her/him/them

Demonstrative pronouns this/that/these/those

Other phrases the former/the latter/the first/the second/the last



## BUSINESS SHORT LIFE

La Ferrera (2016), a researcher at the University of Leipzig, has researched the life cycle of new business start-ups in Britain and Germany. She found that they have an average life of only 3.4 years and considers this is due to two main reasons: one economic and the other social. The former appears to be a lack of initial working capital, the latter a failure to carry out sufficient market research. La Ferrera considers that together these factors account for approximately 70% of business failures. Her conclusion is that the failure to do market research is the more serious disadvantage, as this affects the whole design of the new enterprise.

Reference	Reference word/phrase
La Ferrera	She
new business start-ups	
average life of only 3.4 years	
one economic	
the other social	
the former..., the latter...	

Reference	Reference word/phrase
La Ferrera	She
new business start-ups	They
average life of only 3.4 years	This
one economic	The former
the other social	The latter
the former.. the latter.. ... sufficient market research	These

# Preventing confusion

To avoid confusing the reader, it is important to use reference words only when the reference is clear and unambiguous.

For example:

*Pablo Picasso moved to Paris in 1904 and worked with Georges Braque from 1908 to 1909. He became interested in the analysis of form, which led to cubism.*

In this case, it is not clear which person (Picasso or Braque) 'he' refers to. So to avoid this, write:

*Pablo Picasso moved to Paris in 1904 and worked with Georges Braque from 1908 to 1909. Picasso became interested in the analysis of form, which led to cubism.*



In the following paragraph, insert suitable reference words in the gaps.

Famous for?

When Andy Warhol died at the age of 58 in 1987, few people guessed that a) \_\_\_\_\_ would soon become one of the most valuable artists in the world. In 2007, total sales of b) \_\_\_\_\_ work at auction reached \$428 million dollars. When, a year later, c) \_\_\_\_\_ painting 'Eight Elvises' sold for over \$100 million, d) \_\_\_\_\_ was one of the highest prices ever paid for a work of art. In e) \_\_\_\_\_ working life, f) \_\_\_\_\_ made about 10,000 artworks, and dealers believe that g) \_\_\_\_\_ will continue to be popular with collectors in future. h) \_\_\_\_\_ is because of Warhol's huge reputation as a super-cool trendsetter and innovator. i) \_\_\_\_\_ is also remembered for j) \_\_\_\_\_ remark: 'In the future everyone will be famous for 15 minutes', which seems to forecast today's celebrity culture.





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## Famous for?

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## IMPLIED LANGUAGE

In various written forms, certain words may be omitted for convenience. For instance, in emails the subject (noun or pronoun) is frequently left out:

- *(I) Hope to see you on Friday.*
- *(We are) Looking forward to reading your article.*

In other cases, nouns may be implied in order to avoid repetition:

- *Various metals are used to make alloys with nickel. One such (metal) is chromium.*
- *Oil (production) and gas production have fallen since 2015.*
- *It is hoped to select suitable candidates from the 10,000 (candidates) who apply each year.*

In places, a whole phrase might be implied:

- *They are hoping to reach that goal soon. By 2025 they probably will. (reach that goal)*

Implied language is frequently found in comparisons:

- *The price of land in rural areas is much less than (the price of land) in cities.*

Until you are a very confident writer, it is better not to omit such words or phrases, but it is useful to understand why it is done.

# Definite Articles

This section  
mainly focuses on  
the definite  
article, 'the', and  
provides  
guidelines,  
examples and  
practice



## Use of Articles..

- Unless they are uncountable, all nouns need an article when used in the singular. The article can be either a/an or the.

Compare:

- *a) Research is an important activity in universities.*
  - *b) The research begun by Dr Mathews was continued by Professor Brankovic.*
  - *c) An interesting piece of research was conducted among 200 patients in the clinic.*
- 
- In a) research, which is usually uncountable, is being used in a general sense.
  - In b) a specific piece of research is identified, started by Dr Mathews.
  - In c) the research is mentioned for the first time, and the word 'piece' is used to 'count' the research.

The rules for using the (the definite article) are quite complex.  
Decide why it is used, or not used, in the following examples.

- a) The world's fastest animal is the cheetah.
- b) The US was founded in the eighteenth century.
- c) The government increased taxation in the 1990s.
- d) The French Revolution was partly caused by bad harvests.
- e) The *New Scientist* is published every week.
- f) The south is characterised by poverty and emigration.
- g) Pablo Picasso, the Spanish artist, was born in Malaga.
- h) The River Seine runs through the middle of Paris.
- i) The United Nations was founded in 1945.
- j) The euro was introduced in 2002.

In general, the is used with:

- i) superlatives (*fastest*)
- ii) time periods (*eighteenth century/1990s*)
- iii) unique things (*government, world*)
- iv) specified things (*French Revolution*)
- vi) regular publications (*New Scientist*)
- vii) regions and rivers (*south/River Seine*)
- viii) very well-known people and things (*Spanish artist*)
- ix) positions (*middle*)
- x) institutions and bodies (*United Nations*)
- xi) currencies (*euro*)



In the following sentences, decide if the words and phrases in bold are specific or not and whether 'the' should be added.

*Example:*

\_\_\_\_\_ inflation was a serious problem for \_\_\_\_\_ Brazilian government.  
Inflation was a serious problem for the Brazilian government.

- a) \_\_\_\_\_ engineering is the main industry in \_\_\_\_\_ northern region.
- b) \_\_\_\_\_ insurance firms have made record profits in \_\_\_\_\_ last decade.
- c) \_\_\_\_\_ global warming is partly caused by \_\_\_\_\_ fossil fuels.
- d) \_\_\_\_\_ mayor has been arrested on suspicion of \_\_\_\_\_ corruption.
- e) \_\_\_\_\_ moons of Jupiter were discovered in \_\_\_\_\_ eighteenth century.
- f) \_\_\_\_\_ tourism is \_\_\_\_\_ world's biggest industry.
- g) \_\_\_\_\_ forests of Scandinavia produce most of \_\_\_\_\_ Britain's paper.
- h) \_\_\_\_\_ Thai currency is \_\_\_\_\_ baht.
- i) \_\_\_\_\_ computer crime has grown by 200% in \_\_\_\_\_ last five years.
- j) \_\_\_\_\_ main causes of \_\_\_\_\_ Industrial Revolution are still debated.

- NUMBERS

- Students are often required to write clearly and accurately about statistical data.

- This section deals with the practises the language of numbers and percentages.



# THE LANGUAGE OF NUMBERS

In introductions, numbers are often used to give an accurate summary of a situation:

*Approximately 1,800 children between the ages of five and 12 years were selected.*

*The earth's atmosphere appears to be gaining 3.3 billion metric tons of carbon annually.*

*Five winters in the twentieth century were more than 2.4° C colder than average.*

The words figures and numbers are both used to talk about statistical data in a general sense:

*The figures/numbers in the report need to be read critically.*

But number is used more widely:

*She forgot her mobile phone number.*

*Thirteen is an unlucky number in some cultures.*

Digits are individual numbers.

*4,539 is a four-digit number.*

Both fractions ( $\frac{1}{2}$ ) and decimals (0.975) may be used.





There is no final 's' on hundred/thousand/million used with whole numbers:

*Six million people live there.*

but:

*Thousands of people were forced to move from the flooded valley.*

When discussing money, put the currency symbol first: *\$440 m* (440 million US dollars).

Rates are normally expressed as percentages (e.g. *the literacy rate is 75%*) but may also be per thousand (e.g. *the Austrian birth rate is 8.7*).

It is normal to write whole numbers as words from one to ten and as digits above ten:

*There were 16 students in the class, but only eight came to the lecture.*



# PERCENTAGES

These are commonly used for expressing rates of change:  
*Since 2008 the number of prisoners has risen by 22%.*

Complete the following sentences using the data in the next table.

- a) Between 2014 and 2015, the number of students increased by %.
- b) The number increased by % the following year.
- c) Between 2014 and 2017 there was a % increase.

Students studying Law and Politics 2014–2017

2014	2015	2016	2017
200	300	600	1000



## SIMPLIFICATION

Although the accurate use of numbers is vital, too many statistics can make texts difficult to read. If the exact number is not important, words such as *various*, *dozens* or *scores* may be used instead:

- *The snow storm closed 47 schools.*
- *The snow storm closed dozens of schools.*
- a couple                    2
- few                            a small number, less than expected
- a few                         approximately 3–6 depending on context
- several                      approximately 3–4
- various                      approximately 4–6
- dozens of                    approximately 30–60
- scores of                    approximately 60–100

Rewrite the following sentences using one of the words or phrases in the preceding list.

*Example:* Only three people attended the meeting.  
Few people attended the meeting.

- a) 77 students applied for the scholarship.
- b) Since 1975, 53 primary schools have been rebuilt.
- c) The students thought of four good topics for their project.
- d) Five names were suggested but rejected for the new chocolate bar.
- e) Last year 49 books were published on biogenetics.

- a) Scores of students applied for the scholarship.
- b) Since 1975, dozens of primary schools have been rebuilt.
- c) The students thought of a few good topics for their project.
- d) Various names were suggested but rejected for the new chocolate bar.
- e) Last year dozens of books were published on biogenetics.



## THE PASSIVE AND ACTIVE VOICE

The passive voice is more common in academic writing than in other genres, making it more impersonal and formal, but the passive should not be overused.

The **passive** is used when the writer wants to focus on the result, not on the cause or agent:

*Jupiter's moons were discovered in 1610. (passive)*

*Galileo discovered Jupiter's moons in 1610. (active)*

In the first sentence, the emphasis is on the moons, in the second on Galileo.

So the passive is often used in written English when the cause or agent (a person or thing) is less important or unknown.

*Aluminium was first produced in the nineteenth century. (by someone)*

*The colony was abandoned in the 1630s. (for some unknown reason)*

The cause of the action can be shown by adding 'by...':

*The city was flooded by a severe hurricane.*

The passive is also used in written work to provide a more impersonal style:

*The findings were evaluated. (not 'I evaluated the findings')*



Change the following sentences into the passive to make them more impersonal.

- a) We collected the data and compared the two groups.
- b) I interviewed 120 people in three social classes.
- c) They checked the results and found several errors.
- d) We will make an analysis of the findings.
- e) He asked four doctors to give their opinion.
- f) She wrote the report and distributed ten copies.



Adverbs are frequently inserted into the passive structure to add information:

*Emigration was largely banned until 1991.*

*The vaccine was accidentally frozen.*

Underline the passive forms in the following paragraph and add suitable adverbs to each from the box.

## MARS MANIA

In the past it was commonly believed that creatures lived on Mars. Due to the similarity of size with Earth, the planet was thought to have a climate that would permit life. It was discovered that Mars had four seasons, although they were longer than their equivalents on Earth. In the late nineteenth century, straight lines seen on the surface of Mars were considered to be canals, built by Martian engineers. An invasion of Earth by superior beings from Mars was described by H.G. Wells in his novel *War of the Worlds*. Even today it is claimed that primitive life exists on the planet.

commonly, graphically, occasionally, generally, ridiculously,  
additionally





## Further Elements of Writing: Punctuations

Accurate punctuation and use of capital letters help the reader to understand exactly what the writer meant. While some aspects of punctuation, such as the use of commas, can be a matter of individual style, correct punctuation in areas such as quotation is vital.

It is difficult to give precise rules about the use of capital letters in modern English, where nowadays there is a tendency to use them less than before.

However, they should always be used in the following cases:

- a) The first word in a sentence *In the beginning* ...
- b) Days and months *Friday 21st July*
- c) Nationality words *Indonesia and the Indonesians*
- d) Languages *Most Swiss speak French and German*
- e) Names of people/places *Dr Martin Lee from Sydney, Australia*
- f) Book titles (main words only) *Power and the State*
- g) Historical periods *The Bronze Age, the Great Depression*
- h) Names of organisations *Sheffield Hallam University*
- i) The first person pronoun *By Monday I had finished the book*

NB: Seasons are not capitalised (*The course began in autumn*)



# Apostrophes (')

These are one of the most confusing features of English punctuation. They are mainly used in two situations:

(a) to show contractions

He's the leading authority on tax reform

NB: contractions are not common in academic English

(b) with possessives

The professor's secretary (singular)

Students' marks (plural words ending in 's')

Women's rights (for irregular plurals)

NB: It's is the contraction of it is

It's possible the course will be cancelled

The possessive form is its Civilization and its Discontents

## Semicolons (;)

They are used to show the link between two connected phrases, when a comma would be too weak and a full stop too strong

20 people were interviewed for the first study; 33 for the second.

Semicolons are also used to divide up items in a list when they have a complex structure, as in a multiple citation: (Maitland, 2006; Rosenor, 1997; The Economist, 2006b; University of Michigan, 2000).

**Colons are used:**

(a) to introduce explanations

The meeting was postponed: the Dean was ill.

(b) to start a list

Three aspects were identified: financial, social and ethical.

(c) to introduce a quotation: As the Duchess of Windsor said: 'You can never be too rich or too thin'.

## Commas (,)

These are one of the most common punctuation marks, but also the hardest to provide guidance for, since comma use is partly a matter of individual style.

It is useful to think of commas as providing a brief pause for readers, to give them a chance to make sense of a chunk of text. Overuse can slow down the reader, but equally a lack of commas can cause confusion.

Some instances of necessary comma usage are:

(a) after introductory words or phrases: However, more cases should be considered before reaching a conclusion.

(b) around examples or comments: Certain investments, for instance shares, are highly volatile. Nationalism, it is widely recognised, has a positive and negative side.

(c) with some conjunctions: Three hundred people were interviewed, but only half the responses could be used.

(d) in lists: Apostrophes, colons, semicolons and commas must all be used with care.



# Others

Hyphens (-) are used with certain words, such as compound nouns, and certain structures:

Hyphens (-) are used with certain words, such as compound nouns, and certain structures:

A well-researched, thought-provoking book.

Her three-year-old daughter is learning to read.

Exclamation marks (!) and question marks (?):

‘Well!’ he shouted, ‘Who would believe it?’

Brackets or parentheses ( ) can be used to give additional detail:

Employee attitudes do not affect other dimensions of customer satisfaction (price and quality).

I use singular or plural?

The choice of singular or plural can be confusing in various situations, Such as in the use of countable and uncountable nouns.



The main problem areas with singular/plural for international students are shown here.

a) Nouns should agree with verbs, and pronouns with nouns:

*There **are** many **arguments** in favour.*

*Those **problems** are unique.*

b) Uncountable nouns and irregular plurals usually have no final 's':

*Most students receive free **tuition**.*

*The main export is tropical **fruit**.*

c) General statements normally use the plural:

*State **universities** have lower **fees**.*

d) 'Each/every' are followed by singular noun and verb forms:

*Every **student** **gets** financial support.*

e) Two linked nouns should agree:

*Both the **similarities** and **differences** are important.*



# Find the mistakes in the following sentences

- i) The proposal has both advantages and disadvantage.
- ii) A majority of children in Thailand is vaccinated against measles.
- iii) There are few young people in rural area.
- iv) Many places are experiencing an increase in crimes.
- v) Each companies have their own policies.



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# TIME MAKERS

When describing a sequence of events, it is important to make clear what happened when. Time markers such as 'ago' and 'since' are often used to explain the timing of events. But the application of some of these words is restricted to particular tenses.



Let's study the following:

*She went on a training course **for** six weeks.* (with numbers, without start date)

*The report must be finished **by** June 12th.* (on or before)

*He has been president **since** 2007.* (with present perfect, must specify start date)

*They are studying in Bristol **until** March.* (end of a period)

*The library was opened two years **ago**.* (usually with past)

*The hotel is closed **during** the winter.* (with noun)

***Before** writing he studied over 100 sources.* (often followed by – ing form; also after)

*He applied in May and was accepted two months **later**.* (often used with numbers; also earlier)

*She bought the car **while** working at Harvard.* (two things happening at the same time)



