

### **Does grammar matter?**

In most assignment guidelines given in the Business School, assessment criteria tend to focus on aspects such as answering the question, using course theories and content, and writing analytically. Writing grammatically may be a minor criterion in terms of marks, but it is significant in terms of how clearly and accurately ideas and information are expressed. If there are serious grammatical problems, this will interfere with the meaning being expressed. So, yes, grammar does matter!

Beyond the requirements of the assignments in your courses, clear expression is a requirement for communicating effectively both orally and in writing. High level oral and written communication skills are essential requirements for most commerce related, middle and senior management positions. Grammar matters at work too!

### **Is grammar only a problem for non-English speaking background students?**

The language used by native speakers when speaking English may not always have the same features as the standard grammar expected in written assignments. Native speakers of English, as well as non-native speakers, may find their assignments returned to them with words crossed out or underlined. An awareness of grammar is important for all students.

### **What are the most frequent grammar mistakes in student writing in the Business School?**

Learning advisers in the Education Development Unit have observed that there are certain grammar mistakes that frequently occur in student writing. The most frequently noted mistakes involve problems with:

- parts of speech
- subject/verb agreement
- number agreement
- articles
- tenses
- parallelism
- pronoun reference
- independent and dependent clauses
- sentence length

## Parts of speech

Some non-native speakers of English have difficulty selecting the appropriate part of speech. This is particularly a problem for speakers of languages in which the form of a word does not change when the grammatical role of the word changes. The term “part of speech” refers to the categories: verb, noun, adjective, adverb, pronoun, article and preposition.

### Incorrect

This report gives an analytical of the financial stability of XYZ Ltd.

### Correct

This report gives an analysis of the financial stability of XYZ Ltd.

*In the first sentence the adjective ‘analytical’ is used in a position where the noun ‘analysis’ is required.*

## Subject/Verb agreement

Native speakers of English, as well as non-native speakers of English, sometimes make mistakes with subject/verb agreement.

### Incorrect

The more rapidly the economy grow and the complexities of business increases, the more rapidly the need for accounting grow.

### Correct

The more rapidly the economy grows and the complexities of business increase, the more rapidly the need for accounting grows.

*If the subject of the verb is singular the singular form of the verb must be used. If the subject of the verb is plural the plural form of the verb must be used.*

## Number agreement

This is particularly a problem for speakers of languages in which nouns are not marked to indicate singular or plural.

### Incorrect

The financial information consists of a profit and loss statements for the year ending 30/6/96, and a balance sheet as at 30/6/96 for three separate accounting system.

### Correct

The financial information consists of profit and loss statements for the year ending 30/6/96, and a balance sheet as at 30/6/96 for three separate accounting systems.

*The singular article “a” can only be followed by the singular form of a countable noun. Countable nouns must be in the plural form if they are referring to more than one.*

## Articles

This is one of the most difficult aspects of English for non-native speakers as some languages do not have articles. Other languages have a similar system of definite and indefinite articles as English does, but use the articles differently.

### Incorrect

Form yourselves into the groups of 4 or 5 people and develop marketing plan for the new product.

### Correct

Form yourselves into groups of 4 or 5 people and develop a marketing plan for a new product.

*There are many different rules about the use of articles in English. One is that all singular countable nouns should be preceded by an article. If the reference is general the indefinite article 'a/an' should be used. If the noun is plural and the reference is general no article is required.*

## Tenses

Choosing the appropriate tense for the context can present problems. A common mistake in student writing is for the time perspective to change between sentences and even within sentences.

### Incorrect

In this article, we will provide conceptual definitions of four vanity-related traits, develop self-report measures of the traits, and have extensively validated these measures. We then demonstrated the relevance of the traits to a number of consumer-related behaviours. Last, we offer a discussion with implications for future research.

### Correct

In this article, we provide conceptual definitions of four vanity-related traits, develop self-report measures of the traits, and extensively validate these measures. We then demonstrate the relevance of the traits to a number of consumer-related behaviours. Last we offer a discussion with implications for future research.

*This is a sentence in the introduction to an article identifying the scope of the article. In such a sentence it is common to use the simple present tense. It would not, however, be incorrect to use the future tense or the present perfect. The problem with the incorrect sentence above is that there is no consistency in the choice of tense.*

## Parallelism

This aspect of language use causes problems for both native speakers and non-native speakers of English.

### Incorrect

The goals of macro-economic policy include increasing gross domestic product; inflation should be controlled and for unemployment to be as low as possible.

### Correct

The goals of macro-economic policy include increasing gross domestic product, controlling inflation and maintaining unemployment at as low a level as possible.

*In the correct sentence all three items are expressed in the same form. In this particular case the linked phrases begin with a gerund. This is what is meant by parallelism. While the first sentence is grammatically correct, it is more difficult to understand its meaning because each of the goals is expressed with a different grammatical form. Parallelism is not only an issue to consider in organising sentences, but also in organising paragraphs and larger sections of a text. It is important to keep headings and subheadings in a report in a parallel form.*

### Pronoun reference

When using pronouns care should be taken to ensure that there is no ambiguity in regard to the noun to which the pronoun refers (the referent). Native speakers and non-native speakers can have problems with pronoun reference in their writing.

### Incorrect

As politicians are often less interested in the environment than in economic development, they often neglect it.

### Correct

As politicians are interested in economic development, they sometimes neglect the environment.

*In the first sentence the referent for the word "it" is unclear. According to usual practice it should be "economic development", which is the closest singular noun, but given popular ideas about politicians one can guess that the writer actually meant "it" to refer to "the environment". In the second sentence there is no confusion of meaning. In general, pronouns are used much less in writing than in speaking.*

### Independent and dependent clauses

There are two main types of clauses in English: independent and dependent. Every sentence must have an independent clause. It can also have one or more dependent clauses. All clauses must have a subject and a verb. Independent clauses can form sentences by themselves. They do not begin with a word that indicates a link with another clause. Dependent clauses usually begin with a word that indicates their link to the independent clause.

### Incorrect

Although the course was difficult, but she learned a lot from it.

### Correct

Although the course was difficult, she learned a lot from it. Or The course was difficult, but she learned a lot from it.

*Each of the correct sentences has one independent clause – a clause that is not preceded by a linking word.*

**Incorrect**

He has no money is the main problem.

**Correct**

He has no money, which is the main problem. Or The fact that he has no money is the main problem.

*In the first sentence 'he has no money' is an independent clause. An independent clause cannot be the subject of another clause.*

## Sentence length

A common problem for both native speakers of English and non-native speakers is to write sentences that are too long. It is more difficult for a reader to grasp the main point of sentences that have several points to make.

**Incorrect**

Plagiarism has been increasing at a great rate over the past few years due to the widespread availability of Internet access, which enables students to get copies of other writers' work which at one time would only have been available in libraries.

**Correct**

Plagiarism has been increasing at a great rate over the past few years. This increase is partly due to the widespread availability of Internet access, which enables students to get copies of other writers' work that at one time would have only been available in libraries.

*In the first sentence support for the claim is given together with the claim. It is easier for the reader to understand if the claim is made first in one sentence and then the support given in a subsequent sentence.*

There are many websites you can access to give you more advice regarding editing for grammar. Go to the **useful web sites** handout and then look for the links to grammar sites.