

Improving Your Grammar in Education Assessments

To ensure your readers understand your ideas, you need more than appropriate vocabulary. It is also very important that your sentences make sense. Using grammar effectively can help achieve this goal. This flyer gives you some strategies to help improve your use of articles, subject verb agreement and verb tense which are some particular areas many education students face.

Articles

Articles in English are the words 'a', 'an', and 'the'. Their use can be difficult because there are many rules governing their use and there may be no direct equivalent in the first language (for ESL learners). Some of the most common rules for article use are set out below.

1. Using an indefinite article (a/an):

The article 'a/an' is used with nouns that are not yet specific (i.e. not definite) to the reader. 'A/an' has a similar meaning to 'one'. Therefore it is only used with a singular countable noun:

"I have read *a* book on this topic".

2. Using the definite article (the):

The definite article 'the' implies that the reader knows which noun is referred to. This may be because:

(i) The noun has been mentioned before:

"Some schools have *a* career counselor. *The* position has important roles and responsibilities".

(ii) There is a word, phrase or clause that comes before or after the noun and makes it specific. Often this is in the combination of noun/preposition/noun or adjective/noun:

"*The* results for October are above average".

"*The* Communicative approach was favored by most teachers".

Unlike the indefinite article, the definite article can also be used with plural nouns or uncountable nouns.

"*The* books relating to *the* class homework are in your reading guide".



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

3. Strategies to determine the appropriate article

Underline the nouns in your text and check whether they need an article. Ask yourself:

- Is it countable or uncountable (*)?
 - ⇒ If it is a countable singular noun, you need to either add an article or make it plural
 - ⇒ If uncountable, then you may need either 'the' or no article (∅).
- Is it definite or indefinite?
 - ⇒ If definite then you may need 'the'.
- Is it singular or plural?
 - ⇒ If plural, it may need either 'the' or no article (∅).

* If you are not sure if a noun is countable or uncountable check with the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>). Nouns will be marked "C" or "U" for countable and uncountable respectively.

Subject Verb Agreement

Another area to be careful about is the use of the verb form in relation to its subject. The verb form chosen must agree with the subject. Some examples of errors in subject-verb agreement are below:

✗ "John live in France".

✓ "John *lives* in France".

The subject **John** (he) requires the third person singular form of the verb *to live* (**lives**).

✗ "The arguments is sound and well supported".

✓ "The arguments *are* sound and well supported".

The subject **arguments** (they) requires the third person plural form of the verb *to be* (**are**).

Some general rules

Below are six general rules about subject-verb agreement. The subject of each sentence is in bold. It can be useful to consider what pronoun could replace the subject. These are marked in brackets where applicable.

1. Singular subjects joined by the word 'and' are generally plural (they).

Both the Art teacher and the students *enjoy* a student centered approach.

2. Indefinite pronouns (someone, anyone, no-one, anybody, somebody, nobody, one, either, neither) usually take a singular verb.

No-one *likes* to fail at university.

3. Nouns that are preceded by a quantifier (some, any, all, most) can be singular or plural. This depends on whether the noun is countable or uncountable.

Some of the policies (they) *were* rejected whilst others were approved. (policies = countable noun)

Some of the research (it) *was* conducted at the University of Melbourne. (research = uncountable noun)

4. After a subject joined by 'either...or', 'neither...nor', or 'not only...but also', the verb tends to agree with the subject *nearest* to it.

Neither the lecturer nor the students *want* to reschedule the class. (**want** agrees with **students**)

5. 'There is' and 'there are' agree with the noun that follows.

There *is* **flexibility** in this kind of management structure.

There *are* many **advantages** to this kind of management structure.

Verb tense

While generally writers maintain one tense in their text - usually simple past or simple present - it is useful to mix other tenses as appropriate. Some particular tenses can be useful to consider in your writing.

Present Perfect

The present perfect is useful for introductions when you are giving the general background to a subject:

"Over the last decade schools have experienced significant change in X"

Past Tenses

Various past tenses can be used to describe what you saw on a practicum or particular research that has been conducted:

"While at the centre, I observed that the children played..."

"The findings revealed that Group A in the study remembered 67% more items".

Present Simple

If you generalise from past research or make conclusions based on observations the present simple is recommended:

"These results/observations indicate that when teachers show enthusiasm, student motivation increases".

Future Tenses

Various future tenses are useful for predictions:

"If this approach is followed hopefully students will have developed more confidence in numeracy by the end of their first year".

Passive Voice

The passive tense is commonly used to describe actions that are processes or procedures:

"Students are then asked to discuss the issue at this point in the lesson".

Other important points to remember:

- When changing tenses in a paragraph, 'signaling words' or time phrases are useful e.g. *Since then, currently, now, in the past* and so on.
- If you are using a continuous tense include the *be* verb too ("He is studying").
- After a modal (i.e. *could* or *should*) use the base form of the verb ("The students should study Y").

Editing for verb tense

- Look at each paragraph and ask:
 - what is the main time focus of the paragraph?
 - are all time words and verbs used consistently with that focus?
- Now find the verbs and ask yourself for each sentence:
 - does the verb tense used agree with the time focus of the paragraph and/or time words used in the sentence?

Further Resources

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>)

Darling's Guide to Good Grammar: A comprehensive guide to all aspects of grammar and syntax (<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar>)