



ESOL Writing: Common Errors and Challenges

Graduate Support at CTL has compiled this handout in order to support ESOL graduate student writers. We understand that ESOL writers face unique challenges, as compared to writing in English as an L1, writing in English as an L2 is more challenging. Writing is a complex process that requires you both to be aware of and successfully combine different components of a language, from word choices and punctuation to rhetorical strategies and sentence structures. Academic writing in an L2 provides further challenges because you must negotiate faculty opinions about writing, learn style guides that vary in each discipline, and develop specific and precise writing that will be legible to other scholars. This handout contains examples of common errors and challenges in academic English as well as support for the specifics of American English and writing improvement strategies.

Word Usage: One of the most common challenges for an L2 learner is to find a particular word to express a concept in L2. Since the lexis of any language changes more rapidly than grammar, it adds to the difficulties of an L2 writer. The common lexical difficulties faced by an L2 writer can take different forms and be broadly categorized into various categories including spelling, typos, incorrect spell checker choices, mistaken meanings, and many more. Here are a few types of these issues.

- **Typos:** Parks vs. parcs; enough vs. enouh; ever vs. eber (can happen due to misunderstanding of syllable, missing silent letters, or pressing wrong key on keyboard)
- **Spell checker/Autocomplete:** Ameri(ca/can); thes(is/aurus) (wrong ending to a word, esp. for lengthy terms)
- **Homophones:** are words that have the same pronunciation but different meanings or spellings. For instance, Lose vs. loose; compliment vs. complement (similar or same pronunciation but different meaning).
- **Homographs:** are words that have the same spellings but not necessarily pronounced the same and have different meanings and origins. For instance, Bear (to endure) vs. bear (the animal); lead (element) vs. lead (start off in front).
- **Related Words:** Later/Latter; Breath/Breathe; Through/Thorough (be careful that you are using the correct word and not a closely related/closely spelled word instead)
- **Verb Tense:** Run vs. ran; buy vs. buyed vs. bought (happens often with irregular verbs)

Commonly Misused Words: The words in this list are homophones, related words, and contractions that are among the most frequent errors we see.

- **It's / Its / Its'**
 - It's a beautiful day! (contraction of "it is")
 - Download the program, along with its readme file. (possessive)
 - Its' is not a word, but looks like English plural possessives when 's' is the last letter



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- **Affect / Effect**
 - The outage shouldn't affect us. (verb – to act on, influence)
 - The outage shouldn't have any effect on us. (noun – result)
- **To / Too / Two**
 - I am going to the store. (preposition)
 - She decided to go along too. (adv. – also)
 - My jacket is too small. (adv. – to an excessive amount)
 - I have two buttons missing. (number)
- **A lot / Alot / Allot**
 - The workers are worrying a lot about their jobs. (adv. – to a great degree/extent)
 - Alot is not a word.
 - We were each allotted twenty tickets. (verb – to assign/distribute)
- **They're / Their / There**
 - They're going to store together. (contraction of “they are”)
 - The managers are in their weekly meeting. (possessive)
 - Place the flowers there. (adv. – indicates location/direction)
- **You're / Your**
 - You're going to be a great writer! (contraction of “you are”)
 - Your hair looks nice today. (possessive)
- **Who's / Whose**
 - Who's on the door? (contraction of “who is”)
 - Whose watch is this? (possession)

Grammar: Grammar is viewed as the most essential aspect of language learning. Therefore, we should focus on grammatical concepts in order to improve our writing skills. Here are some tips and reminders about common grammatical issues that ESOL learners face.

Subject-Verb Agreement: ensure that the verb tense is the same, singular or plural, as the subject. Remember that certain uncountable nouns are used with either verb tense.

- The box of ornaments belong in the attic. The box of ornaments belongs in the attic.
- The data is flawed. The data are flawed. The datum is flawed. (Check your citation style guide for recommendations).

Run-on Sentences: long sentences are often confusing for readers.

- I love to write papers and I would write one every day if I had the time but sadly I lack the time.
- I love to write papers. I would write one every day if I had the time, but sadly I lack the time.
- I love to write papers; I would write one every day if I had the time. Sadly, I lack the time.

Tense Shift: be mindful of the tense you have already established and provide transitions when necessary.



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- Although it was only a four-hour ride from my home in Pennsylvania to my boyfriend's home in Virginia, I was terrified. **Looking back**, I think my feelings may have been influenced by stereotypes of the Old South.
- Explanation: The reason for this tense change is that I am thinking now—in the present time.

Comma Splice: this is when you join two independent clauses with a *comma* or *transitional expression*.

- The results of the study were inconclusive, therefore more research needs to be done on the topic.
- The results of the study were inconclusive; therefore, more research needs to be done on the topic.

Pronoun/Antecedent Agreement: antecedents are the words that the pronouns refer to; pronouns must agree with their antecedents in number, gender, and person.

- Larry has a car. His color is blue. ("His" does not make sense because the reader expects to hear the color of the car, based on previous information)

Contractions: These are generally considered a part of informal writing. Therefore, avoid using them in formal writing such as scholarly works, resumes, essays, and publications.

Punctuation Marks: Be mindful of the punctuation you use. The most common issues in graduate L2 and ESOL writing are the use of periods, commas, semicolons, colons, and the various dashes.

- **Periods:** these separate complete sentences. Use them when the idea is complete or you need to change to a different subject or verb. They are also used in groups to create an ellipsis... which omits words that are unnecessary, especially in a direct quotation.
- **Commas:** these create pauses and breaks between clauses, so use them when you have dependent clauses, but you can also use them when you have an independent clause with a conjunction. Commas should be used with introductory elements, elements in a series, coordinate modifiers, and non-restrictive modifiers.
 - **Introductory Elements:** Each day of the week, Graduate Support helps students with issues in academic writing
 - **Elements in a Series:** The stages of writing include: brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising, editing, and polishing.
 - **Coordinate Modifiers:** As with anything else, academic writing requires practice, and can be mastered by anyone who practices their craft.
 - **Non-restrictive Modifiers:** Graduate Support, which is located in Mesa Vista Hall, is an open service to students of UNM.
- **Semicolons:** they separate off independent clauses that have similar ideas; they are used frequently by academics to create complex relationships within a sentence. They are also used to separate sentence elements in a series that already contains commas.
- **Independent Clauses:** There are two ways to set up appointments at Graduate Support; one way is coming in for a one-on-one consultation in person, and the other is scheduling a one-on-one consultation over the phone or via email.



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- **Elements in a Series:** The participants in the study were from Albuquerque, New Mexico; Denver, Colorado; and Phoenix, Arizona.
- **Colons:** are used to provide lists and extra information, to separate titles from text or subtitles, or to preface a direct quote: “they shouldn’t be used too often.”
- **List preceded by an independent clause:** The stages of writing include: brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising, editing, and polishing.
- **To separate titles from subtitles:** I am currently reading a book entitled *Minimalist Syntax: Exploring the Structure of English*, by Radford.
- **Dashes:** these come in three forms: the **hyphen** -, the **en dash** –, and the **em dash** —. The hyphen bridges the gap between two words that are part of the same phrase, or extends a word to the next line, like in the terms fixed-rate mortgage or six-month trial. The en dash is used between numerical ranges, such as 13–18 or 2002–2021. The em dash is used like a comma or semicolon, but to add more emphasis to a sentence—making sure your reader pays attention.

Use of Fragments: avoid sentence fragments. Fragments are clauses and phrases that lack a subject, verb, or are missing information that the sentence structure requires. Though they may appear in speaking and creative writing, they are not appropriate for academic writing.

- One of my friends lives in Albuquerque. Owns the house across the street. (This is missing “They” before the verb “owns” in the second sentence)
- Where my family went on vacation. (This is missing context so it cannot stand on its own--what information do you need to provide about the place your family went?)

Transitions: These are a major challenge for many ESOL graduate students. Some languages use transition words and phrases in a manner that does not translate well to English. In English, transitions are essential, and they are used in a wide variety of grammatical situations. They help show cause and effect (hence, as a result, therefore, thus, etc.), order of importance (main clause and dependent clause, phrase and clause), comparisons and contrasts (similarly, likewise, in contrast, however, still, on the contrary, nonetheless, yet), purpose (for this purpose, for this reason), chronology or sequence (in addition, furthermore, besides, next, first, second, third, last), time or location(nearby, beyond, here, now, then, since), etc.

- Here is a list of transition categories and some advice on how to use them effectively:
<https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/style/transitions/>
- Note that there are different levels of transitions--you use a different type of transition between sentences versus the transition you use between chapters or sections. A sentence or paragraph transition can be done in a word or phrase, but a section requires a sentence explaining the transition in further detail.

Quotations: Consider that there are multiple ways to cite an idea of piece of evidence—direct quotations, paraphrases, and summaries. They all have their place in a piece of academic writing.

- **Direct Quote:** Philosopher David Hume said “Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty.”
- **Paraphrase:** Hume argues that the beauty of any object or phenomenon is an abstract concept created in the observer’s mind, since each individual measures beauty according to their own standards.



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- **Summary:** Hume argues that beauty is determined subjectively by individual observers.

Plagiarism: Another frequent error among ESOL writers is improper use of citations and evidence, which might be considered as plagiarism. These typically fall into one of a few categories. The first is direct quotation--when quoting a sentence verbatim, always enclose it with quotation marks and provide a citation for the sentence(s). Even a short phrase requires attribution via citation. The second category is paraphrasing or summarizing. Some writers inadvertently use language or sentence structures directly from the text, even when they are paraphrasing elsewhere. If your paraphrase is too similar to the original text, consider a direct quotation instead, and ensure you are citing the ideas included in the paraphrase. The final category is incorrect citation formats. If another scholar cannot accurately use your citation and find the original document, you must revise your citations so that it meets the standards laid out in your discipline's style guide (such as APA, MLA, and Chicago).

For more support regarding format, structure, and argument, please see the other resources we have available:
<https://ctl.unm.edu/graduate-students/resources/index.html>

Other References and Resources:

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ960446.pdf>

<https://sites.google.com/site/introtoacademicwritingforesol/oer-textbook>

<https://www.nu.edu/student-services/writing-center/writing-across-the-curr/working-with-esl-and-int/>

<https://www.nypl.org/help/community-outreach/immigrant-services/learn-esol-online-resources>

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/teaching-multilingual-students/>

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/style/>

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/writing_style/style%20/Style%20Introduction.html

<http://blog.tesol.org/great-grammar-academic-writing-resources-for-advanced-ells/>

<https://www.esc.edu/online-writing-center/resources/ell/esl-resources/>

<https://blog.taaonline.net/2014/10/10-tips-for-eslefl-academic-writers-and-everyone-else-too/>

<https://vwcceng111.pressbooks.com/chapter/chapter-4-the-writing-process/>

<https://students.unimelb.edu.au/academic-skills/explore-our-resources/developing-an-academic-writing-style>

<https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/academicwriting>

<https://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/>