

## **Solutions to “Introductory writing exercises”: A quick lesson in spelling, commas, subject/verb agreement, combining sentences and direct writing.**

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### **Introduction**

Each of these examples was designed to contain one or more errors or cases of inefficient writing. I encounter most of these problems in writing that I edit from postgraduate students particularly, but not exclusively, with those attempting to write professionally in English as a second language. Do not be concerned if you struggle with some of these challenges; most students are on a journey to improve their writing and editing skills. You will improve if you learn from your mistakes. Unfortunately, not all of these errors will be picked up with the spelling or grammar check systems in word processing software. More advanced exercises and solutions are provided in Maguire, G., 2007a. Additional editing exercises and possible solutions.

[http://www.ecu.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/193318/Advanced-Exercises.pdf](http://www.ecu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/193318/Advanced-Exercises.pdf)

If you find that you frequently make any of the errors below, develop your own “writing challenges checklist” and add them to it. Each time you write a new document, review it against this personal checklist. You might find the following numbered list useful for this purpose: Maguire, G., 2008a. Numbered list of writing faults.

[http://www.ecu.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/193363/Numbered-Writing-Fault-List.pdf](http://www.ecu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/193363/Numbered-Writing-Fault-List.pdf)

In this document I attempt to explain the meanings of incorrect/correct words and introduce the concepts of self evident text and direct writing. A strategy, for temporarily deleting phrases and clauses from a complex sentence, is demonstrated as it helps greatly with detecting a specific inconsistency within a sentence i.e., where one key component of the sentence is singular and the other is plural. The desired outcome is called subject/verb agreement and failing to achieve this agreement is probably the most common error I have encountered in my lengthy editing career (see below for explanations of the terms verb and subject). Much more comprehensive explanations of these and other numbered writing faults can be found in Maguire, G., 2008b. Explaining the numbering system for highlighting writing faults. [http://www.ecu.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/193368/Explaining-numbered-writing-faults.pdf](http://www.ecu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/193368/Explaining-numbered-writing-faults.pdf)

The first four exercises each involve only one error while the remaining exercises are more challenging. The first exercise introduces the idea that formal writing has some different rules to popular writing. Most of the exercises in this document are not taken from drafts of academic writing but are based on more simple text or popular speech. This document was designed to be read by students, particularly those whose first language is not English, prior to attending one of several workshops that involve analysing more challenging text adapted from drafts of academic writing. The document arising from those workshops is Maguire, G., 2015 “Advice to research students on editing: Opportunities, responsibilities, techniques and direct writing.”

[http://www.ecu.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/193359/Advice-to-research-students\\_2015.pdf](http://www.ecu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/193359/Advice-to-research-students_2015.pdf)

In analysing these exercises, I have gone beyond just fixing the errors. I have provided some quite different ways of communicating the information the sentences convey. I call this **direct writing**. **The aim is for the minimum number of words, without loss of meaning, in text that can easily be read aloud.**

### Solutions to writing exercises

1. *Its a difficult problem to solve.*

In this case, “Its” stands for “It is” and should be written as “It’s”. The possessive form of my Christian name Greg is Greg’s e.g., Greg’s office. You would think that the possessive form of the word **it** would be **it’s** but it is just **its** e.g., its title. Otherwise there could be confusion between whether **it’s** stands for **it is** or the possessive of **it**. I should note that in formal writing e.g., academic writing, we do not use **it’s** or any other set of abbreviated words that use ‘ to replace a missing letter or letters e.g., **it’s** for **it is** or don’t for **do not**. We just use **it is** or **do not**.

The correct version of the first sentence is “It’s a difficult problem to solve” (for popular writing) and “It is a difficult problem to solve” (for academic writing). We could write either version more directly e.g., “Solving this problem is difficult.” (Five words instead of seven.)

2. *Your the hardest working student in the group.*

In this case the word “Your” should be written as “You’re” in popular writing and “You are” in academic writing. The word “your” means that it belongs to you e.g., “Your Christian name is John.”

The correct version of the first sentence is “You are the hardest working student in the group” at least in academic writing. We could write either version more directly e.g., “You are the student group’s hardest worker.” (Seven words instead of nine.)

3. *As a researcher he is outstanding, as a teacher he is a poor communicator.*

The problem here is that the two halves of this sentence are topics that are too different to just be separated by a comma. Instead, we use a semi-colon (;). We could have two separate sentences but there is enough overlap between the two topics to allow use of a semi-colon.

The correct version of the first sentence is “As a researcher he is outstanding; as a teacher he is a poor communicator.” It could be written more directly but some information would be lost e.g. “He is a much better researcher than a teacher.” (14 words instead of 9 but I prefer the longer version.)

4. *The author asked me to comment on his draft paper before he sent the paper to other colleagues to comment on.*

The problem here is that text is repeated in the same sentence. The word “paper” appears twice as does the text “to comment on”. Such problems can be avoided if you write more directly. Note that we can use “it” to avoid saying “paper” twice.

A better version of the sentence is “The author asked me to comment on his draft paper before other colleagues considered it.” (15 words instead of 21; the assumptions are that he would have sent the draft paper to these colleagues before they could consider it and that their comments would have then been provided. These assumptions seem reasonable.)

5. *The Principle of the school first got there attention before he talked to them about the affects, on the school’s reputation, of poor behaviour in public.*

Firstly, there are three common spelling errors.

The Head of a School is a “Principal”. The word can also mean important e.g., the principal violinist in an orchestra. In business it relates to capital or property. In contrast, “principle” can mean a standard of moral conduct or a general truth, law or theory e.g. “He worked it out from first principles.”

Another spelling error is the use of “there” instead of “their”. The word “their” means belonging to or associated with them. The word “there” means relates to a place but can be used in other ways such as “there is a photocopier in the store room” or “that dog there attacked Ben” or “an insane person is not all there” or you might say “there you are” when you give something to another person. One word in English can have several meanings so it is good to write the word down when you are confused about it and check it in a hard copy or on-line dictionary.

The spelling “affects” is wrong and should be “effects”.

Usually, affect is a verb i.e., a doing word while effect is a noun i.e., a thing, place or name. Thus we could say that “when we affect something we produce an effect i.e., a change.” The verb “affect” can also mean to put on an appearance or to imitate e.g., to affect an accent. The word “effect” can be a verb in one type of circumstance e.g., “the army effected (pulled off or achieved) a coup. Similarly, “affect” can be a noun. The emotion produced by an idea is its “affect”.

The correct version of the sentence is “The Principal of the school first got their attention before he talked to them about the effects, on the school’s reputation, of poor behaviour in public.”

It is possible to write this more efficiently. “The School Principal first got their attention before discussing the effects, on the school’s reputation, of poor behaviour in public.” (20 instead of 26 words. You might also delete the first use of “School” on the basis of it being self-evident that we are talking about a School Principal.)

6. *The dog Ben belongs to my friend Tim who slobbers alot.*

There are two problems with this sentence. The spelling of “alot” is incorrect and should be two words “a lot”. The sentence is also misleading as it suggests that Tim slobbers a lot when we hope that it is the dog that slobbers! It is better to put slobber and dog closer together in the sentence. The alternative is to use commas to isolate the information about Tim.

Two correct versions would be:

“The dog Ben, which belongs to my friend Tim, slobbers a lot.” or

“My friend Tim has a dog Ben that slobbers a lot”. This second version is written in a more direct style.

A less formal version which reflects the way people usually speak is “My friend Tim’s dog Ben slobbers a lot”. The text “a lot” is not used often in formal writing and the same may be said for “slobbers”. In formal writing, we might write it as “Ben, a dog owned by my friend Tim, salivates profusely”. (Ten words instead of 12.)

7. *Apple produce the better computers then IBM.*

The problem is that Apple is an organisation and is singular so we write “Apple produces” i.e., we use a singular form of the verb. If the name of the company was “Aquaculture Industries” we would treat it as plural and use the plural form of the verb. This issue is called subject/verb agreement.

The second problem is the use of the word “the” and it is very confusing for many international students. We use “the” when we refer to something specific i.e., a particular computer, for example, the computer that I purchased last year. In the example above we are talking about any computer produced by Apple so we do not need the word “the”. (The word “the” is called a “definite article”.)

The word “then” should be “than”. The word “then” means at that time or period of time. The word “than” is used to introduce a second item or element that is being compared to the first item or element. In this case we are comparing Apple computers against IBM computers.

The correct version of the sentence is “Apple produces better computers than IBM.” (Five words instead of six in the original sentence.) (No, I personally do not care which company produces better computers!)

8. *PowerPoint software is produced by Microsoft. It is vary useful as it provides many option.*

*The range of format templates are particular impressive.*

This looks quite straightforward, however, there are three spelling errors, a plural verb is used when a singular one is needed, and two paragraphs are used when the three sentences relate to the same topic and should all be in the one paragraph. There are also too many short sentences and these can be easily combined. Finally, there is uncertainty about what the last sentence means.

The word “vary” is a verb and can mean;  
to change or modify something e.g., to vary your routine, or  
to change with another variable e.g., his mood will vary depending on how much alcohol he has consumed.

In the above sentence we need the word “very” not “vary”. The word “very” is used to intensify a descriptive word e.g., an adjective such as “useful”. Thus “very useful software” is rated more highly than “useful software”. It can also intensify a noun such as name e.g., “his very name was enough to cause fear”.

The word “many” clearly suggests that there are more than one so it is plural and there would be “many options” not “many option”.

“The range of format templates are particular impressive” sounds correct as the plural word “templates” is beside the plural verb “are” but the subject of the sentence is “range” not “templates” so it should be “The range of a format templates is particular impressive”. (Many people would use the plural verb “are” because “range of templates” implies more than one template. The final version of this text, given below, overcomes this difficulty with a more direct style of writing.)

One of the ways to sort out which words are the subject and the verb, in a more complex sentence, is to temporarily delete the phrases and clauses in the sentence. A phrase begins with a preposition such as “in”, “at”, “on” or “for” and does not include a verb. In one of the “correct” versions for 6 above, I used the clause “which belongs to my friend Tim”. You can tell that it is a clause because it begins with “who”, “what”, “that”, “which” or “when”, includes a verb and is not a question. In the above sentence “The range of format templates are particular impressive”, we can delete the phrase “of format templates” leaving us with “The range are particular impressive”. It is now clear that the subject is “range” (singular) and the verb is “are” (plural). We can then see that we do not have “subject/verb agreement”.

In practice, because the word “templates” is plural, do we not really need to include “range of”? “Several templates” is a more direct approach (see below).

The remaining spelling error is the use of “particular” when it should be “particularly” impressive.

The last sentence is “The range of format templates are particular impressive.” Are we impressed with the number of templates or the quality of the templates?

If we are impressed with the number of templates, a better version of the sentence is: “Microsoft’s PowerPoint is very useful software as it offers numerous options including several format templates.”

If we are impressed with the quality of the templates, a better version of the sentence is: “Microsoft’s PowerPoint is very useful software as it offers numerous options including several impressive format templates.”

(These two versions use 15-16 words instead of 23 in the original text.)

This lengthy analysis of Exercise 8 highlights the need to write in a manner that leaves no doubt about your meaning. This is true for most writing (perhaps poetry is allowed to be obscure); however, it is essential for academic writing.

This analysis has also highlighted the benefits of “direct writing” where we use the minimum number of words to convey the essential information very clearly and to form a sentence that can be read aloud easily. Reading your writing aloud is one of the most powerful techniques for editing your own writing.

(Again, no personal bias is intended here as there are other brands of presentation software that are quite efficient.)

9. *Architect software is example of computer revolution changing the way professionals does their work.*

There are four problems with this sentence.

The word architect is a noun but it is not an adjective i.e., a descriptive word such as “useful” in “very useful software” from 8 above. The adjective for the noun architect is “architectural”. One way that “architect” can be used in a descriptive way is in the complex expression “an architect-designed house”.

We need to include “an” before “example”. It is not the only example so we do not use “the”. However, it is “an” example from a range of possible examples. We use “an example” rather than “a example” because the word “example” commences with a vowel i.e., “a”, “e”, “i”, “o” or “u”. (“An” is called an “indefinite article” i.e. it is not as specific as “the”; this is a “definite article”.)

In this sentence above we are talking about “the computer revolution” i.e., it is quite specific. It is not a general category such as “horse racing”.

Finally, there is a problem with “professionals does”. Strictly, in the text “the way professionals does their work” means “the way that professionals does their work” and the second part is a clause as discussed in 8 above. The verb “does” relates to the subject of the clause “professionals” which is plural so we need the plural form of “does” which is “do”. Clearly, the way English drops out words that are not essential e.g., “that” in this case, makes it challenging to edit correctly if it is not your native language.

A better version of the sentence is “Architectural software is an example of the computer revolution changing the way professionals do their work.” You could also consider a shorter version “Architectural software is an example of the computer revolution changing the way professionals work.” (14 words as in the original sentence.)

*10. I tried to teach EXCEL to students years ago. Who were doing a Graduate Diploma. They cheated by hand calculating each cells to avoid learning how to use formula.*

Believe it or not this actually happened in an assignment and all of the students copied the hand calculated version but it contained an error so they all got it wrong! There are several problems here, quite aside from the doubtful ethics of the students.

You could say “tried to teach” but if you were eventually successful it would be more direct to say “taught”.

“Who were doing a Graduate Diploma” is just a clause yet it is written as a stand-alone sentence. This can only be justified if it is written as a question which, in this case, it is not. It will have to be joined to the first sentence.

In “they cheated by hand calculating each cells”, the word “each” is singular so we need “each cell” not “each cells”. The alternative would be to use “all of the cells” but it is longer.

The text “how to use formula” is incorrect because we would need to specify “formulae”, the plural of “formula”, because there are many formulae available in EXCEL. The longer version would be “how to select a formula” but the shorter version will do.

The next problem is the one from 8 above in that there are too many short sentences.

A better version is “When teaching EXCEL to Graduate Diploma students, I found that they had cheated by hand calculating each cell to avoid learning how to use formulae.” It could be written more directly as “Years ago, my Graduate Diploma students cheated by hand calculating each cell to avoid learning how to use formulae in EXCEL.” (21 words instead of 29 words in the original text.)

(I should emphasise that many people would simply say formulas and some journals accept this word. This is a case of the English language evolving to suit the way people prefer to speak.)



11. *The problem the administrator found with network security procedures were that internal clients are using covert channels.*

There are two problems. We do not have subject/verb agreement as “problem” is singular and “were” is plural. We should apply the technique, outlined in 8 above, of temporarily deleting phrases and clauses. The sentence is an example of where a word has been deleted (appropriately). Strictly, the sentence is “The problem **that** the administrator found with network security procedures were that internal clients are using covert channels.” The word “that” was left out to make the sentence easier to read and to avoid repetition of the word “that”. We can temporarily delete the clauses “**that** the administrator found” and “that internal clients are using covert channels” and the phrase “with network security procedures”, leaving “The problem were.” Clearly, “were” should be “was”.

The other problem is that the tense is mixed within the sentence. This can occur appropriately e.g., Jones (2002) argued that “the mathematics skills of school leavers are declining”. Here “argued” is past tense and “are” is present tense but the latter is in a quotation. However, in most cases we try to avoid mixing tenses within a sentence. In our sentence above, “...were that internal clients are using covert channels” contains “were” which is past tense and “are” which is present tense. Both should be in past tense.

The style could also be improved. Do we need to be told that “using covert channels” is a problem? In direct writing we try to minimise “self evident” text.

A better version is “The administrator found that use of covert channels by internal clients was compromising network security.” (This uses 15 words rather than 17 words in the original sentence.)

12. *Toms mother gave him a choice of the last two pieces of fruit. He chose an apple rather than banana because it fit better in lunchbox.*

This sentence involves some common problems for students dealing with English as a second language i.e., the use of possessives and the articles “a/an” and “the”.

**Toms** is the possessive form of **Tom** and must be written as **Tom’s**. There is only one apple and one banana available. He did not just choose “an apple”; he chose “the apple”. Similarly, it has to be “the banana” not “banana”. If there was no limitation on the number of each type of fruit available, we could say that “he chose an apple rather than a banana.”

The text “in lunchbox” poses two more problems. It is “Tom’s lunch box” or “his lunch box) i.e., a word has been inappropriately deleted and lunch box itself is two words. Reading the sentence aloud may have revealed that the word “his” was missing, however, depending on your native language, it may not seem wrong.

We again have the problem of two short, related sentences which probably can be merged. The text “fit better in his lunch box” relates to the word “apple” which is singular. The problem is that we need to be consistent with tense. The sentence begins with “He chose” which is past tense so we use the past tense of the verb fit i.e., fitted. This verb can be singular or plural so there is no problem from that perspective i.e. we can say “He fitted through the space” or “They fitted through the space”. (It is useful to note that in the U.S. “fit” can be past tense. However, ECU is an Australian University and your academic writing should use Australian English. If you were writing for a U.S. journal, you would set your spelling check for U.S. format. In WORD, this is done via Tools/Language/Set language.)

I also have a preference for “into his lunch box” rather than “in his lunch box”.

A better version is “From the two pieces of fruit offered by his mother, Tom chose the apple because it fitted into his lunch box.” (This uses 21 words rather than 27 words in the original sentence. We have lost the word “banana” but is it important? If it was, we could say “chose the apple not the banana”.)

13. *The problem, with the students writing is, that they are not understanding use of commas.*

There are three problems here. Firstly, the word students is used as a possessive and, as we use “they” later, it is clear that it is plural. The possessive form of the plural word **students** is seen clearly in the following text **students’ writing**.

Secondly, the sequence “they are not understanding use of commas” is awkward and not direct. It could be “they do not understand use of commas”. This is still a little awkward and could be improved by revising it as follows “they do not understand how to use commas”. We could have said “they do not understand the appropriate use of commas” but that is unnecessarily complex.

Finally, the text “with the students’ writing” relates to the noun “problem”, so the commas should enclose just this phrase. A good test of the appropriateness of the placement of a comma is whether we still have a functional sentence after we delete the section in commas. If we do as I have just suggested and place the second comma after the word “writing”, we temporarily delete “with the students’ writing”. The sentence becomes “The problem is that they....” and this is functional. However, if we accept the position of the commas in the original sentence the deletion would produce “The problem that they....” which is not functional.

One version is “The problem, with the students’ writing, is that they do not understanding how to use commas.” If the students are using commas then surely they are writing. Do we need to state the self-evident? Perhaps we could also highlight the problem more efficiently.

A better version is “Unfortunately, the students do not understanding how to use commas.” (10 words instead of 15 in the original sentence.)

It is important to note that we do not usually edit a single sentence but rather an entire document or at least a significant part of it. The issue of whether text should be deleted depends on the surrounding text in the entire document. As my colleague, Dr Jo McFarlane pointed out, we might not delete the words “writing skills” in the following text.

“The problem with the students’ listening skills is that they cannot remember more than two commands given at the same time. The problem with the students’ writing skills is that they do not understand how to use commas.”

14. *This new software is very exciting because it can be operated by voice for handicapped clients. It was developed in close partnership with experts on the needs of those with relevant disability. The marketing Division is frustrated by the companies refusal to allow it to be adapted for PC.*

Overall, it seems to be rather long. Perhaps sentences can be combined. The third sentence is not about the software's advantages and there is probably a need for a separate paragraph and perhaps a lead-in or topic text/sentence to bridge between the two types of information. If written well enough, there may not be a need for two paragraphs.

The text "the needs of those with relevant disability" does not read well because we are talking about "a relevant disability". It is not "the relevant disability" because more than one disability would be assisted by voice recognition.

We can have a "Marketing Division" or a "marketing division" but not a "marketing Division". The other problem is that the possessive of **company** is **company's** and not **companies** which is the plural of **company**.

A better version is "This exciting new software, developed in partnership with experts in relevant disabilities, should be highly marketable if approval can be obtained for production of a PC compatible version." (This uses 28 words rather than 50 words in the original version.)

#### **Summary of writing tips**

1. *Write down words you do not understand and look them up in a hard copy or on-line dictionary. (As I edit across many fields and love reading novels, I frequently encounter new words. I try hard to follow this advice. Recently I read the word "indigent", looked it up and found that it means "very needy or lacking the necessities".*
2. *Use your spelling check and grammar check options on your computer but do not rely on them alone. Grammar check explanations can be quite confusing. These checks also do not pick up all errors. I used spelling and grammar checks on this document, carefully leaving the errors you had to find, and some of the changes suggested by the software were not very good. However, it was still useful to apply these checks.*
3. *Read your draft carefully, preferably some time after you have completed a draft. I drafted this during the day and read it later that night as I have difficulty with proof reading my own writing accurately.*
4. *Read your advanced draft aloud if it is convenient or get someone else to read it. My thanks to Dr Jo McFarlane, Academic Writing Consultant, ECU for her very useful comments on this document.*
5. *Try to think about direct ways of making a statement i.e., write directly!*
6. *Do you frequently make some of the errors discussed above? Develop your own "writing challenges checklist" and add them to it. Each time you write a new document, review it against this personal checklist.*

**See the other ECU web documents by G. Maguire mentioned in this article for more tips, errors and exercises.**