Grammar

Writing clear sentences

The aim of this handout is to introduce just a few ideas about clear and grammatically-correct sentences for academic writing. You do not need any prior knowledge about English grammar to use this handout.

Obviously, a short handout cannot cover much more than the very basics. Thus you should not use this handout as your only guide to clarity and accuracy in academic writing! This handout might be useful if you have had feedback indicating that you need to ‘check your sentences’ or ‘take care with grammar’, or commenting that the meaning of some of your sentences is not very clear.

Why do I need to know about sentences?

The sentence is the basic building block of written English. A huge amount of communication – perhaps more than ever – is done with text. Being able to write clearly and completely accurately will be enormously beneficial to you, both at university and at work.

What is a sentence?

In English, a sentence has to have two elements: a subject and a verb. Here are some examples:

1. Most students work hard.
2. This fact notwithstanding, some people believe, probably because of stereotypes in some popular media, that most students are lazy.
3. This perception is wrong.
4. Stereotypes persist.

The subject is simply the thing or person that is performing the verb.

A verb is a ‘doing word’ (i.e. indicating an action, such as ‘work’ in example 1) or a ‘being word’ (i.e. indicating state, such as ‘is’ in example 3).

Note that the grammatical use of ‘subject’ is different from the more everyday meaning.

Example 4 shows that a sentence can consist of just a subject and verb and still make sense and be perfectly grammatical.

Most sentences, however, contain more than just a subject and verb: they also contain a complement. In very simple terms, the complement is ‘the bit that comes after the verb’. In examples 1 and 3, the complement is provided by the words ‘hard’ and ‘wrong’.
You do not really need to remember the idea of the complement in a sentence. What is useful, though, is to **remember the idea of the subject and verb**. One way to apply this important idea is to remember that most sentences have three main elements:

**something** – **being/doing** – **something**

The following table shows some examples of how to apply this idea:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject (something)</th>
<th>Verb (being/doing)</th>
<th>Complement (something)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most students</td>
<td>work</td>
<td>hard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The clearest sentences</td>
<td><em>are</em></td>
<td>short and simple.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even when a sentence is much longer, with lots of extra information included, it should be possible to spot the main point of the sentence (something being/doing something):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject (something)</th>
<th>Verb (being/doing)</th>
<th>Complement (something)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It</td>
<td><em>should be possible to spot</em></td>
<td>the main point.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, sentences can contain more than one main subject and more than one main verb. In these kinds of sentences, **conjunctions** (words than connect complete ideas) are used to ‘move on to’ the next idea. The following sentence provides an example of this:

Sentences with a single subject and verb may be clearest, but academic writing often necessitates longer sentences that explain relationships between ideas, so we are not suggesting that you use short sentences all the time.

Here’s that sentence broken down:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject (something)</th>
<th>Verb (being/doing)</th>
<th>Complement (something)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sentences with a single subject and verb</td>
<td><em>may be</em></td>
<td>clearest,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but academic writing</td>
<td><em>often necessitates</em></td>
<td>longer sentences...,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>so we</td>
<td><em>are not suggesting</em></td>
<td>that you use short sentences all the time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You’ll have spotted that the conjunctions used in the sentence above are ‘but’ and ‘so’. **It’s really important to remember to use conjunctions when you want or need to write more complex sentences that contain several subjects and verbs** – in other words, when there is more than one ‘something being or doing something’.

To recap, there are two reasons why you need to understand this stuff about sentences:

1. Knowing that sentences need to show ‘something being or doing something’ can help you to write with greater clarity.
2. Being able to spot the main subject(s) and verb(s) can help you to improve your sentences when you are editing your work.
To demonstrate how awareness of sentence function can help with academic writing, we’ve presented below two versions of the same piece of writing. The sentences in the left-hand passage are neither grammatically correct nor especially clear. The right-hand passage attempts to address the problems of the first, resulting (hopefully!) in a piece that is both grammatically correct and easier to read. About half of the ‘bad’ and ‘better’ examples of sentence features have been explained beneath. What others can you spot?

**Bad sentences!**

1. There are a number of ways to impress your marker with your writing, perhaps the most important goal is the importance of writing clearly because clarity allows complex ideas to be understood. Shorter sentences are often the clearest, much clearer than long sentences.  
2. Which can easily ‘go wrong’.  
3. Because ideas can appear rather disjointed however it is probably in academic writing not wise to use too many short sentences – not fluent.  
4. So a mix of short length sentences and medium length sentences is probably best, shorter sentences can be used for key points in your argument, medium length sentences up to perhaps three lines in length can be used to develop ideas. This might of course vary though.  
5. Depending on your assignment.

**Better sentences!**

1. There are a number of ways to impress your marker with your writing. Writing clearly is perhaps the most important goal. Clarity allows complex ideas to be understood. Shorter sentences are often much clearer than long sentences, which can easily ‘go wrong’.  
3. However, it is probably not wise to use too many short sentences in academic writing, because ideas can appear rather disjointed. As a result, the writing loses fluency.  
4. Thus a mix of short- and medium-length sentences is probably best, because shorter sentences can be used for key points in your argument, and medium-length sentences, up to perhaps three lines in length, can be used to develop ideas. This mix might vary, of course, depending on your assignment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bad Sentences</th>
<th>Better Sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1 Left: long for a first sentence, and also repetitive (‘important’ and then ‘importance’).  
Right: better because three sentences have been used, each clearly stating one thing being/doing something.  |
| 2 Left: “Which can easily ‘go wrong’” is a fragment – what is the subject? (i.e. what is it that can easily go wrong?) The word ‘which’ cannot often be used to start a sentence.  
Right: see how long we have to wait for the subject (“it”) and verb (“is”)?  |
| 3 Left: see how long we have to wait for the subject (“it”) and verb (“is”)?  
Right: the subject and verb come immediately after the introductory word “However” – much clearer.  |
| 4 Left: the sentence beginning “So a mix...” contains three main points, and the sentence ‘runs on’ without conjunctions after the commas.  
Right: a similar sentence (beginning “Thus a mix...”) still has three main points, but is grammatically correct because the conjunctions “because” and “and” have been used.  |
| 5 Left: another example of a fragment.  |

Writing excellent sentences is by no means always easy, so do remember to contact the Academic Skills Unit (ASK) for further support if you need to improve your academic writing, or for help with any other academic skills issue.