

English Language Learners: Grammar

Learning to write a college paper can trigger a breakdown in grammatical accuracy for all students, but this is especially true for English Language Learners. You may feel that you are fairly fluent in English, but when faced with a new context, your language skills deteriorate. This is normal; second (or third, or fourth) language acquisition takes a long time, and it is unrealistic to expect perfection. However, sometimes the surface errors are so distracting that the reader cannot understand your point, no matter how valid or interesting. As an ELL writer, you can work on recognizing the patterns of your errors and learn to self-edit your papers. The more aware you are of these types of errors, the more progress you will make in eliminating them from your writing.

Common ELL Error Types

- **Verb tense/ Tense inconsistency.** A sentence uses an incorrect tense or a passage switches illogically from one tense to another. For example, *I was living in Northampton since 2008*, or *The government fell in 1989 because the economy is in trouble*.
- **Verb form.** A verb is incorrectly formed. For example, *I was sleep all morning*, or *The children have understand the basics of geometry*.
- **Subject-verb agreement.** The verb does not agree with the subject in person or number. For example, *She study Italian literature*, or *Violent behavior and creative brilliance often coexists in one human being*.
- **Word form.** The writer chooses the wrong part of speech. For example, *The woman's moodiness behavior irritated her mother*, or *He was a tyranny ruler*.
- **Singular/plural noun endings.** This occurs when a writer is unsure about which nouns are countable and which aren't. For example, *I need to comb my hairs*, or *The college provided informations about the incident*.
- **Articles.** Many ELL students leave out articles (*the, a*) in their writing or put in inappropriate articles. For example, *Brave Orchid believed in importance of work*, or *The President Kennedy's speech inspired patriotic emotions*. (Note: Correct use of articles is notoriously difficult to master. The best way to learn how to use them is by osmosis: reading, writing, and speaking in English as much as possible. It takes time. Fortunately, unlike the previous types of errors, mistakes with articles do not obscure your meaning.)

Internet Resources For ELL Writers

The most effective way to improve your grammatical accuracy is to learn your own particular patterns of error and watch for them when you proofread your writing. Once you have identified these types of errors, you may also want to clarify the grammatical rules behind those errors. Knowing the rules will also help you anticipate problems in future writing. The following internet links provide succinct explanations of English grammar rules and helpful exercises for practice.

- **Grammar and ESL Exercises: The OWL at Purdue**
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/25/>

- This link, part of the OWL (On-line Writing Lab) at Purdue University, provides an excellent selection of printable "handouts" with clear explanations of a wide variety of grammar points, as well as interactive exercises for immediate practice. Particularly recommended for ELL students.

- **Guide to Grammar and Writing: Professor Charles Darling Capital Community-Technical College**

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar>

This is an exhaustive grammar and writing guide with concise explanations of rules. Click on the INDEX button to get the comprehensive list of topics (everything from subject/verb agreement to tense consistency to comma splices). Each grammar rule is presented clearly, including exceptions, followed by several interactive quizzes (with helpful hints along the way).

- **The English Language Center Study Zone**

<http://web2.uvcs.uvic.ca/elc/studyzone/grammar.htm>

This site provides a basic index of grammar points, presented in simpler language than that used in Charles Darling's guide, which may be particularly helpful for ELL students. The simplified presentations of grammar rules are followed by interactive exercises. There are also especially helpful pages on conditionals—"Which Conditional Should I Use?"

- **Self-Study Grammar Quizzes: The Internet TESL Journal**

<http://a4esl.org/>

This site only provides quizzes without preliminary explanations, but for the motivated student, it can be a useful resource.

Copyright 2008, the Jacobson Center for Writing, Teaching and Learning at Smith College.