

Common Mistakes by ESL Writers

Writing in a different language than your native can prove to be very difficult. You'll find that there are some common mistakes ESL writers make. Mainly, these mistakes happen when the writer uses their native language's rules instead of their new language's rules. Unfortunately, little errors throughout your paper can distract your reader from what you're actually trying to say. How to write numbers, what should and shouldn't be capitalized, when to use 'a' or 'an,' and having the subject and verb agree in numbers are a few mistakes an ESL writer might make.

Using 'A' or 'An'

One mistake ESL writers tend to make is improperly using an article (the, a/an). To avoid this, first decide if the sentence has an accountable or unaccountable noun. For example, the unaccountable noun 'advice' should not have an article, while an accountable noun like 'apple' should. Another common error is incorrectly using 'a' or 'an'. In general 'a' goes before words starting with a consonant, while 'an' is used before words beginning with a vowel. Of course, the confusion begins when the exceptions come into play. 'An' also goes before any word that starts with an unsounded 'h,' like in the phrase, 'an honest mistake.' The second exception comes when 'u' makes the same sound the 'y' makes in 'you.' An example of this would be, 'A unicorn has not been seen.'

Definite or Indefinite clauses?

Another error is how to use definite and indefinite articles. The definite article 'the' should be used when talking about a specific noun or phrase. 'The dog with the hurt foot is eating' is an example of when to use the definite article 'the' because you're talking about a specific dog. 'A dog with a hurt foot is eating' is an example of using the indefinite article 'a.'

Numbers as words or figures?

The subject and the verb in a sentence should always agree in number. Not doing so can distract the reader and make the writing more difficult to read. For instance, 'She and her friends are at the mall.' should be used instead of 'She and her friends is at the mall.' When writing numbers, it can be difficult to determine if you should write the number out, or keep it as a figure. Generally, the number is spelled out if it can be done in just a couple of words. A large number, such as 31,356, should be written as a figure.



Capitalization

Knowing what words should be capitalized can also be complex. Not only should the first word of any sentence, or the pronoun 'I' be capitalized, but proper nouns and family relationships when used as proper nouns should also be capitalized. For example, "We had eggs and bacon cooked by Mother" uses Mother as a proper noun and needs to be capitalized. 'Mother' in the sentence, "We had eggs and bacon cooked by my mother" isn't a proper noun and should remain lower-case.

Different meanings

In the English language, there are words that sound alike but mean two different things. In order to know which word you should use, you'll have to know the definition of each word. While 'its' is a possessive adjective, 'it's' is a contraction for it is or it has. Conscious is the adjective meaning awake, while conscience is a noun that means the sense of obligation to be good. A couple of other examples of words that can easily be confused and used incorrectly are except/accept, affect/effect, and lead/led.

Sentence Fragmentation

Sentence fragments can be another concern ESL students might have. Generally, a fragment is a part of a sentence that's become disconnected from the main clause. While journalists may use dependent clauses as a separate sentence, academic writing practices don't. Every dependent clause needs to be with a dependent clause. The following is an example showing a sentence fragment: 'I want a new roommate. Because I don't get along with the one I have now.' Usually, this type of mistake can be easily corrected by combining the two sentences by replacing the period with a comma. Sometimes, there may be an incomplete main clause that doesn't have a main verb or subject. 'A movie with an exciting plot and unexpected ending' is an incomplete main clause. To remedy, add 'I watched' to the beginning.

Nouns and Pronouns

An appositive is a noun or pronoun that helps explain another noun or pronoun. In the sentence 'My sister's car, a boring four-door sedan, is in the shop.' the appositive is 'a boring four-door sedan' is further explaining the sister's car. While most of the time the appositive will come after the word it explains, it can also be placed before. The tricky part with these sentences is when to use a comma. If the appositive is essential to the sentence meaning then a comma should not be used. Commas around the appositive are only put there when the sentence would be complete and clear without it.

Verbs

Irregular verbs are another confusing part of the English language. When it comes to using the correct form, you will need to determine if you are talking in the present, past, or past participle. Although many verbs can be used correctly, lie/lay, sit/set, and rise/raise cause the most problems. When speaking in present tense, lie or lying can be used to tell a falsehood or to recline, while lay or laying means to put or place. 'I need you to lay out my clothes while I lie down to rest.' is one example. It starts to become confusing when trying to match the correct word in past tense. 'Lie' or 'lying' to



recline will turn into 'lay,' while the present tense 'lay' changes to 'laid' in the past tense. It doesn't matter what tense you speak in, but make sure you don't change tenses throughout a sentence or paragraph.

Learning a second language is difficult enough, but with enough practice and experience it can become easier. After awhile, you can begin to hear when a sentence doesn't sound right, which is one way to determine if the sentence has been written correctly. Remember, keep the same tense throughout the whole paper, know when it should be 'an' instead of 'a,' and understand what a word should be capitalized. While computers can help point out grammar errors, writing grammatically correct is a skill that shouldn't be looked over. You're best to send your work to a professional proofreading and editing company such as Supaproofread.com, look at more information on ESL (English as a Second Language) Proofreading and Editing services that we offer.

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