

Basics

Can you explain what a sentence is? What are the basic parts of a sentence?

Look at this sentence:

Americans celebrate Thanksgiving on the fourth Sunday of November.

Can you identify what parts of speech there are here?

Americans celebrate Thanksgiving on the fourth Sunday of November.
noun verb noun preposition date

Remember, a sentence always begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop, a question mark or an exclamation mark. In formal sentences, it is best to avoid exclamation marks.

The academic context

At university or college, you will need to use the correct tone for your sentences depending on what you are writing. For an essay or a report, you will need to use formal language.

Key features

- Formal language is usually written language for an academic purpose and is different to spoken language or friendly language sent in messages.
- Don't use contracted words. For example, use *cannot* rather than *can't*.
- Use vocabulary appropriate to the subject. For example, you wouldn't say *guy*, you would say *person*.
- Avoid phrasal verbs. For example, use *relate (to)* rather than *go with*.
- A sentence should be well structured, and usually neither very long nor very short.
- You can use compound sentences to add information with words like *and* or *but*.

Challenges / difficulties

It is necessary to use the correct word order in sentences. In English, this is subject, verb, object (SVO). This may be different to your own language, so the best way to avoid mistakes is to check over your sentence structure after you have written your report/essay and make sure you have followed the SVO rule.

If you need to add extra information to your sentence, it normally goes at the beginning or end of the sentence. For example:

Every Tuesday, the postman delivers parcels.

(The extra information here is *Every Tuesday*.)

How can I develop this skill?

Remember that practice makes perfect. You can practise when you are reading, writing, listening and speaking English by paying attention to sentence structure and tone.

Learning outcome


When you have practised this skill, you will understand how to write a sentence for an essay or report using appropriate vocabulary and the right level of formality. You will improve your ability to construct a sentence using the SVO + extra information rules you have learnt, using correct punctuation.

Theory to practice

Look at the first two paragraphs of a student's essay. The sentences need editing. Quickly skim through them and then answer questions 1–5 below.

nowadays it's difficult for to decide graduates what they want to do work therefore
 this essay will examine the advantages and disadvantages of careers follow people
 a university graduate will choose probably a job which goes with their degree
 for example if someone studies medicine or law they more likely are to become a
 doctor or a lawyer however a degree in English could to loads of jobs lead such as
 teaching writing or working in advertising or human resources.

Annotate your changes with a coloured pen.

- 1 Check the sentences for word order.
- 2 Now correct the punctuation.
- 3 Finally, check for use of a formal tone.
- 4  Compare your work with a partner and discuss where more than one possible change could be made.
- 5 Now look at a revised version of the essay. Changes and additions are highlighted. Did you make the same changes?

Nowadays, it is difficult for graduates to decide what work they want to do.
 Therefore, this essay will examine the advantages and disadvantages of careers
 people follow.

A university graduate will probably choose a job which relates to their degree. For
 example, if someone studies medicine or law, they are more likely to become a
 doctor or a lawyer. However, a degree in English could lead to a variety of jobs,
 such as teaching, writing, or working in advertising or human resources.

Ways to get more practice

With your partner, find a short text written in an informal style (a blog might be a good place to look).

- Discuss how you would change some sentences to make the tone more appropriate for an essay/report.
- Check the punctuation of the sentences, and decide whether you would make changes.
- Report back to the class on how you changed the sentences to make them more suitable for a piece of academic writing.