

Learning, Teaching
and Student Engagement

English Skills

Structuring Sentences

This module covers concepts such as

- Simple, compound and complex sentences
- The use of active and passive voices in your writing
- Using modifiers and nominalization appropriately

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Sentences

When you write a single sentence, you need to consider **vocabulary choice, style, grammar and sentence structure**. The most crucial point to remember is that the **verb** is the key to every sentence; without a verb you do not have a sentence.

SIMPLE SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Even the simple sentence is not always straightforward. When you are translating a simple sentence from your language into English, you need to consider: the length of the sentence; language patterns in English; and the word order.

First, communicate your message clearly, using as few words as possible. The reader should not need to read a sentence twice to understand it.

Second, learn some collocations from your discipline, which are words that are commonly used together. Also, be aware of language patterns, such as verb-preposition-noun or verb-gerund combinations.

Third, consider the typical word order in English, for both active voice and passive voice.

Active voice pattern:

1. **subject**
2. **verb**
3. **object**

e.g. He *likes* ice cream.

Identify the **verb; an action, state or emotion**. The verb is *likes*. Active voice verbs can be in any tense. But don't forget that the verb needs to agree in number with its subject!

To identify the **subject**, ask **who or what** performs the action, is in the state, or feels the emotion that the verb describes. Remember that the subject of the verb can be one word or an entire phrase.

In active voice, the **object** comes after the verb. Note that objects can be either direct or indirect. Indirect objects are introduced with *to* or *for*.

Practice

Identify the **subject, verb and object** in each of the simple active sentences below. Are any of the objects indirect?

1. The security guard unlocks the doors.
2. The lecturer answered the student's question.
3. She will talk to the student in her office.
4. The James Cook University SCUBA Diving Club member discovered a new fish species.

Passive voice pattern:

1. **object**
2. **verb in passive form** (to be + past participle)

e.g. The student *was fascinated*.

OR

1. **object**
2. **verb in passive form**
3. **by + subject**

e.g. The student was fascinated *by the book*.

Practice

Change the **tense** of the verb in the examples above, but stay in the **passive voice**.

1. Change to present simple (passive)

.....

2. Change to future simple (passive)

.....

3. Rewrite using active voice and past simple tense.

.....

4. Why is the passive voice used?

a)

b).....

c)

5. Should students *use* the passive voice in academic writing?

in other words...

Should the passive voice *be used* in academic writing?

COMPOUND SENTENCES

A compound sentence is simply two or more simple sentences joined together with coordinating conjunctions such as **for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so**. Note the comma used after the conjunction.

e.g. She rides to work, **and** he catches the bus.

This could easily be broken into two sentences.

COMPLEX SENTENCES

In a complex sentence, simple sentences (independent clauses) are combined with dependent clauses. Dependent clauses are made up of a subject and a verb and do not make sense without the rest of the sentence. They are dependent on subordinating conjunctions such as **because, although, since and when**, or relative pronouns such as **who, which or that**. Note the comma used after the clause below.

e.g. **Although** she works hard, she finds study challenging.

‘Although she works hard’ followed by a full stop is a sentence fragment error.

Practice

Combine the following clauses, using a subordinating conjunction, to make three complex sentences.

- Trees need water
- They can survive for long periods when their roots are deep underground
- He returned to his country
- He missed Australia
- The main cause of this condition is unknown
- More research is needed

1.....

.....

2.....

.....

3.....

.....

PARALLEL STRUCTURE

Sentences often contain **patterns** of words, phrases, or clauses that need to have similar grammatical construction. They are usually joined by commas, and the words 'and' and 'or'.

1a. Not parallel:

His favourite aspects of English are *reading, writing and to listen*.

The first two verbs are in the gerund (ing) form but the third verb is not.

1b. Parallel:

His favourite aspects of English are *reading, writing and listening*.

2a. Not parallel:

He was a poor student because he *waited until the last minute to study for the exam, completed his essay in a careless manner, and his motivation was low*.

2b. Parallel:

He was a poor student because he *waited until the last minute to study for the exam, completed his essay in a careless manner, and lacked motivation*.

3a. Not parallel:

The dictionary can be used to find these: *word meanings, pronunciations, correct spellings, and looking up irregular verbs*.

3b. Parallel:

The dictionary can be used to find these: *word meanings, pronunciations, correct spellings, and irregular verbs*.

MODIFIERS

Modifiers are words or phrases used to describe or clarify a concept. When they are used incorrectly, the reader finds the sentence confusing.

1a. Incorrect modifier

Having finished the assignment, the TV was turned on.

1b. Correct modifier

Having finished the assignment, Jill turned on the TV.

2a. Incorrect modifier

Having arrived late for practice, a written excuse was needed.

2b. Correct modifier

Having arrived late for practice, the team captain needed a written excuse.

NOMINALISATION

When paraphrasing, students often change the verb from active voice to passive voice. This is not always ideal. Another way to change the focus of a sentence is the technique of nominalisation, which means making a verb into a noun.

e.g. The doctor *examined* the patient thoroughly.

OR:

The *examination* was thorough.

Be careful of subtle changes in focus or meaning. Also, do not overuse nominalisation, or your writing will become too 'wordy'.

ANSWERS

Practice: Active Voice

1. The security guard (subject) unlocks (verb) the doors (direct object).
2. The lecturer (subject) answered (verb) the student's question (direct object).
3. She (subject) will talk (verb) to the student (indirect object) in her office.
4. The James Cook University SCUBA Diving Club member (subject) discovered (verb) a new fish species (direct object).

Practice: Complex sentences.

1. *Although* trees need water, they can survive for long periods when their roots are deep undergrounds
2. *When* he returned to his country, he missed Australia.
3. *Because* the main cause of this condition is unknown, more research is needed.

Practice: Passive Voice

1. The student *is fascinated* by the book.
2. The student *will be fascinated* by the book.
3. *The book fascinated the student.*
4. The passive voice is used:
 - a) to place *emphasis on the object and the verb*
 - b) because the *subject is not known*
 - c) because the *subject is not important*
5. Use active voice as much as possible in your academic writing. As a general rule, avoid passive voice.

However, in scientific reports you may need to use passive voice to describe processes.