The guru notes – refined

Improve your writing skills and
optimise the editing experience

Refine
Your final stop

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1. Purpose of this guide

Why should you aim to improve your writing?

Whether you're an academic, business executive, marketing manager or entrepreneur, an aspect of communicating with your audience is written content. While you're in the best position to know what message you want to get across, writing is not necessarily your key skill.

But that can surely be fixed as part of the editing and proofreading process, right? It's not quite that simple. Of course the editor is responsible for improving readability by, for example, shortening sentences and moving around paragraphs – to the extent that both yourself and the editor eventually feel that an ugly duckling has been turned into a literary swan. However, text that requires significant alterations often only creates a rather lame duck – content that is neither accessible nor inspiring.

Write to be read

> **No one can teach anyone to write. But it does help if you know where you are going.**
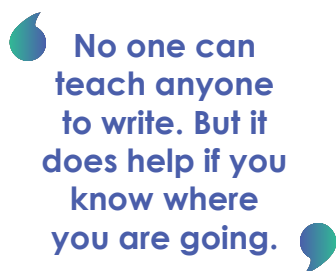
From the movie "The Wonder Boys", in which all the main characters are writers

For non-fiction writers, the topic determines where you're going. But how do you go about the journey to reach your destination? How do you set about writing to be read, grabbing and maintaining readers' attention?

This guide aims to help by highlighting the typical mistakes writers make and offering solutions. It was initially compiled by Ilse Evertse, who is now one of Refine's associates. Over the years, the team added their input based on their experience, and we intend to keep refining this guide to ensure that it stays relevant and useful. By implementing the guidelines, you'll be able to cut down on the time needed for editing or proofreading. It's of course not possible to offer solutions to all potential writing dilemmas, so we still encourage you to use other credible print and online resources.

We hope you find this helpful. If you have questions about any of the tips or guidelines included or suggestions of what else you'd like to see covered in the guide, please get in touch with us at hub@refineteam.com.

2. Getting started

2.1 Learn from others

Whether you are writing a paper, a brochure or a report, read a few examples of similar documents and make notes. What kept your attention or what made you lose interest? What struck you as different or refreshing? What made it easy or hard to read? Did the word choice and tone feel appropriate and natural? Was the key takeout clear? Studying and imitating what others do won't necessarily turn you into an excellent writer, but it can vastly improve your content.

2.2 Plan ahead
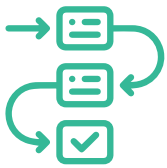
Depending on what you're writing, certain rules may apply:

- If you're writing a dissertation, it would need to be structured in a certain way, which can vary between institutions.

- If you're writing an article that you intend to submit to a journal or other publication, you'll likely have to follow their style rules regarding, for example, referencing and footnotes.

- If you're writing for a very specific audience, certain cultural norms may apply.

- If you're writing for digital platforms, word count limits and formatting restrictions may apply.

If you don't know what these requirements are, make sure you find out.
It will save you a great deal of trouble and reduce editing time and cost.

2.3 Profile your readers

Before you even start writing, it's a good idea to create a picture in your mind of who your potential reader could be.

| Reader attributes	How it may affect your writing
Level of education	**With an educated audience, you may be able to assume a certain level of vocabulary, context/understanding of certain topics and themes, and possibly general knowledge. There are however two important caveats:** • A highly educated audience does not imply that you should use grandiose words and technical terms. Irrespective of education, people generally don't like reading complex, dense text. • The topic of your writing and the reader's field of education may be worlds apart, which means the relevance of their education in understanding your text diminishes. For example, medical specialists may be experts in fields such as biology and chemistry, but they may not know exactly how investment markets work.
Level of knowledge about the topic	As pointed out above, your readers may be experts in many fields but not necessarily on the topic you are writing about. If your content is aimed at a wider audience and the purpose is to educate them, it's essential to consider this context. This not only entails providing the necessary explanations and details, such as defining terminology – it will also affect the tone and general approach of the text.
Motivation to read	Depending on what you are writing, your readers may be genuinely interested in the topic. In other cases, not that much. They may in fact want to avoid it – think of material like terms and conditions or insurance contracts — but it's still essential for them to know and understand the information. In these cases, how the content is positioned is vital to convince readers to read and engage with the text by highlighting upfront why it's important and how they may benefit from reading it.
Other demands on their time and attention	Consider what you know about your readers' circumstances (e.g. that they have demanding, full-time jobs) and what other factors may likely come into play (perhaps they have families). The more things that demand their time and focus, the harder you have to work to get their attention. The context in which they will read the content also plays a role. For example, if you are sharing the content electronically without any personal engagement or follow-up, how will you ensure that you stand out from the vast amount of digital content that's generally available? Keeping this context in mind will automatically make your text simpler, more interesting and understandable.

Mindset matters

Writing is a learning experience. If you approach it with this in mind, you won't get frustrated when you have to explain or rewrite parts of your text, but will instead value it the same way you value other learning experiences.

2.4 Set up the right formatting
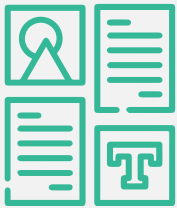
If you are writing content that won't be professionally designed as a final step, you need to ensure that the text formatting is neat and consistent. Editors are not formatters – our focus is on editing the wording. Setting your preferred parameters before you start writing (e.g. heading styles, line spacing, numbering) or, even better, using a template or style sheet will save you a lot of time and frustration later on in the process. If you're not experienced in formatting, it is worth spending time to get to know the ins and outs of the word processing software you are using.

3. Keep the interest

3.1 Your approach

Think carefully about what you include (and exclude)

You may think that sharing everything you know and all related information on a topic is a good approach, but it's not. It tells your readers what you know, but does not make for a meaningful reading experience.

Show your enthusiasm

If you are enthusiastic about the topic you're writing about, that energy is reflected in the text and affects the reader. While it can be challenging to make a non-fiction text "sparkle", it is possible if you focus on capturing your passion for the topic. If the topic you're writing about happens to be less captivating, spend some time thinking of an interesting way in which you can present it. Ask yourself what, apart from the topic, keeps you reading. Make it easier for the reader to follow your argument by using the different text elements covered in this section.

3.2 Headings
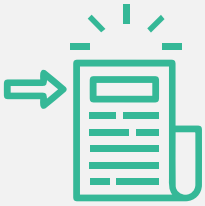
For most long-form content, but particularly content on complex and multifaceted topics, meaningful headings can help form an outline and intrigue and guide the reader. Always ensure that the text that follows a heading is relevant to that heading. Also, keep in mind that more than three levels of headings are seldom reader-friendly.

3.3 Sentence structure

Short and active sentences

Many long, passive sentences are hard to follow and can easily make the reader lose interest. Discipline yourself, be kind to your reader (and editor!) and write every paragraph as succinctly as possible.

Possessive case

Long "of" constructions can be hard to read – make it more reader-friendly by using the possessive case, for example:

> *The heads of the various countries' organisations …*

rather than

> *The heads of the organisations of the various countries …*
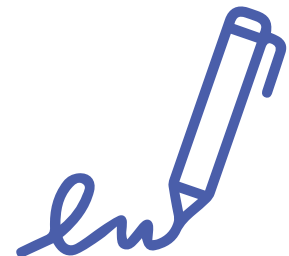
Active voice

Use the active voice where possible; sentences in active voice are generally shorter and more reader-friendly:

> *The employer should guide employees./*
> *Complexity often characterises employee contracts..*

rather than

> *The employees should be guided by their employer./*
> *Employee contracts are often characterised by their degree of complexity.*

When to use the passive voice

There are certain instances where using the passive voice is acceptable and even preferable:

- When the object is more important than the subject: The president was sworn in on Tuesday.
- When you don't know who took the action: My house was broken into yesterday.
- When it's not important who the subject is: The grass was cut yesterday.
- In broad statements presenting widely accepted opinions and norms:
  Rules are made to be broken.

It, this, these

If you start a sentence with "it", "this" or "these" or use it in a sentence and there is more than one noun in the previous sentence, the reader won't know to which noun it is referring. In other words, only use "it", "this" or "these" when you have clearly identified what you are referring to.

> *To save you time and effort, we have created an online application portal.*
> *This enables you to apply from wherever you are and whenever it suits you.*
> ["This" can only refer to the online portal.]

versus

> *Next you should add the butter cubes, strawberries and blueberries to the food*
> *processor. Make sure that these are at room temperature.* [It's not clear whether "these" refer to the butter, the strawberries, the blueberries or all of them.]

Verbs versus nouns

Use verbs instead of nouns where possible:

> *Firm X was intensely involved with organisation Z./People prefer Z … /*
> *By engaging in and supporting the business …*

rather than

> *Firm X's involvement with organisation Z was very intense./People give preference to Z …/*
> *His engagement in and support of the business …*

Word order

The order of words in a sentence can make a big difference in terms of whether it is easy to read and understand or hard to read and confusing.

Consider these examples:

Hard to read and understand	Easy to read and understand
From 2000 onwards, in Atlantis, a gradual power shift has occurred, which resulted …	*In Atlantis, a gradual power shift occurred from 2000 onwards, which resulted …*
The policy core attributes of a governmental programme in a specific jurisdiction will not be significantly revised.	*In a specific jurisdiction, a governmental programme's core policy attributes will not be significantly revised.*

3.4 Logic and flow

Links between sentences and paragraphs

Your sentences and paragraphs should follow one another logically and the link between them should be clear. This is easier said than done. When the link is not obvious, it either means you may have started a new theme or idea without introducing it, or simply require some bridging text.

3.5 Word choice

Setting the right tone

In professional and business communication, it is generally advisable to maintain a certain level of formality by avoiding conversational and slang phrases.

The table below shows a few examples:

Avoid or limit	Rather use
But	**However/Consequently/Nevertheless**
So	Therefore/Consequently
Because of/because of	Owing to (at the beginning of a sentence) Due to (in the middle of a sentence)
And	Furthermore/In addition
For this reason	Consequently
Additionally	In addition/Furthermore
don't/doesn't/didn't/haven't/hasn't/hadn't	do not/does not/did not/have not/ has not/had not
get/got	acquire/obtain
things	matters/issues/points
some	a few
on the one hand… on the other hand …	not only… but also/x as well as y/both x and y

Common mistakes and clunky wording

| Don't write …	Rather write …
*The manager intends to **both** speak to the workers as well as give them a raise.*	*The manager intends to speak to the workers as well as give them a raise.*
*Leaders should express their **own** thoughts on this matter and follow their own wishes.*	*Leaders should express their thoughts on this matter and follow their wishes.* ** If you write "their thoughts" it can't be anybody else's thoughts, therefore "own" is not needed.*
***Compared to** international companies, national companies have fewer employees.*	*National companies have fewer employees than international companies.*

3.6 Using visuals

In a world where people are inundated with information, visual communication is becoming increasingly important. Including visual elements can help keep your readers interested, guide them through the text and make it easier for them to get the key takeout. Complex information or concepts that are difficult to explain can also benefit greatly from visual and graphic elements. Even if the information is not highly complex, breaking up long text with aesthetic visuals can improve the reader's experience.

Examples of visual elements:
- Tables
- Figures/graphs
- Icons
- Infographics
- Images

4. Writing guidelines

4.1 Grammar basics
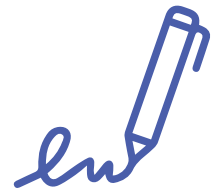
Pronouns

For people, use "who" or "whom":

Use "who" if you can replace it with he/she/they/we if you were to rephrase the sentence: *The people who were watching the match…*	Use "whom" if you can replace it with him/her/them if you were to rephrase the sentence: *Many people dislike the new chairman, whom we have elected.*

For everything else, use that or which. If you could drop the clause and the meaning of the sentence stays intact, use "which" (preceded by a comma or offset with commas if the clause is in the middle of the sentence), otherwise use "that".

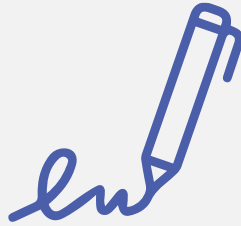|	
*The company **that** faced a fraud case last year opened a new office in Lilliput last week.*	*The house, **which** had a red front door, burned to the ground in a matter of minutes. The weather was sunny the entire weekend, **which** meant the kids could play outside.*

Don't change the pronoun withing the same sentence:

*One cannot change **one's** mind halfway.*	*not*	*One cannot change **your** mind halfway.*

Common grammar errors

where	"where" = a place, therefore: *These are tasks **during which** you are required to …* (not "tasks where you are asked to") *The game **in which** a ball is thrown at …* (not "the game where a ball is thrown at") *A portfolio report **in which** icons are …* (not "a portfolio report where icons are") *A module **in which** members may enter …* (not "a module where members may enter")
many/few and much/little	Use many/few for things you can count, *e.g. many/few friends, projects, lines* Use much/little for things you can't count, *e.g. much/little love, data, support*
can, could, may and might	These words all indicate the possibility of something happening. "May" is more formal and can sound awkward, so it's best to avoid it when possible. However, there are instances in which it will be the most appropriate option: *We may make use of the data that Y collected, although we could run into trouble as permission might be withheld.* If there is a possibility of uncertainty, use could/might: *If the results are limited to the sample, this might lead to a wrong impression…* *By assuming that the authors are referring to case A, we might be following a…*
as and than	Use "than" to compare things that are equal and "as" to compare things that are not equal. *As our competitor, Narnia has more competencies and knowledge **than** our company.* *Eddie is just as tall **as** his sister.*
subject-verb agreement	*There **are** many businesses in this sector …* *not There **is** many businesses in this sector …*
data – plural OR singular?	The origin of "data" is "datum" (singular), which means "data" was the original plural. Today, both are acceptable, but make sure that you are consistent. Also pay attention to specific style guidelines.

Gender-neutral writing

Use plural nouns ("their") rather than "he" or "he/she" or "(s)he".

The singular "they/them" is also widely accepted, e.g. *Every client got a book delivered to them.*

For further guidance on how to make your writing gender-neutral, see *Butcher's copy-editing* and "Using non-sexist language" from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania's writing centre.

Adverbs

- Adverbs are used to describe verbs and usually end in -ly:

> *Brown changed the concept constructively and effectively …*

not

> *Brown changed the concept in a constructive and effective way …*

- For verbs that refer to any of the five senses, use adjectives to describe them:

> *This looks/sounds/feels/smells/tastes … wonderful/beautiful/good/horrible …*

Prepositions

If you are unsure of the correct preposition to use (on, into, for, of, towards, etc.), you can check online in one of two ways:

1

Use online language resources such as the Cambridge dictionary – these sites list verbs and the prepositions that go with them.

2

Do a Google search by typing the different options you're considering (e.g. benchmark **at** or benchmark **against**) and see which option is used most often on **credible** sites.

When doing these checks, write down any preposition-verb combinations that you are not familiar with for reference.

4.2 UK versus US English

UK and US English spelling and punctuation differ in several ways. Start off by deciding which one you're going to use, based on your location, target audience, any requirements from a publication if relevant, or any other factor that you need to consider. Then set your spellchecker accordingly.

How to ensure that your spellchecker is activated
- Press Ctrl+A to highlight all the text in your document.
- Click on the current language on the left-hand side of your bottom toolbar.
- Select the relevant proofing language and deactivate the tick in the "Do not check spelling or grammar" box if there is one.
- Click on the "Set as default" button, select "Yes" and press the OK button.

The most common differences between UK and US English:

UK English	US English
Punctuation is outside the inverted commas: *… which Brown (2007) calls "pretty", we call fair, but Black (2006) calls "handsome". … according to White (2005) "pretty, fair and handsome".*	Punctuation is inside the inverted commas: *… which Brown (2007) calls "pretty," we call fair, but Black (2006) calls "handsome." … according to White (2005) "pretty, fair, and handsome."*
No comma before the final "and" when referencing: *(Brown, Black and White 1920)*	Comma before the final "and" when referencing: *(Brown, Black, and White 1920)*
When counting facts: *Firstly, secondly, thirdly*	When counting facts: *First, second, third*
For verbs ending in an l the l is doubled: *travel, travelled, travelling traveller*	For verbs ending in an l the l is not doubled: *travel, traveled, traveling, traveler*
Favours double vowels ae or oe above e: *leukaemia, manoeuvre, oestrogen, paediatric*	Favours e above double vowels ae or oe: *leukemia, maneuvre, estrogen, pediatric*
Generally keeps -e for word modifications: *judge* to *judgement*, *live* to *liveable*	Often drops -e for word modifications: *judge* to *judgment*, *live* to *livable*
Favours "ogue" for noun endings: *analogue, catalogue, dialogue*	Uses both "og" and "ogue": *analog* or *analogue*, *catalog* or *catalogue*, *dialog* or *dialogue*
Punctuation is outside the inverted commas: *… which Brown (2007) calls "pretty", we call fair, but Black (2006) calls "handsome". … according to White (2005) "pretty, fair and handsome".*	Punctuation is inside the inverted commas: *… which Brown (2007) calls "pretty," we call fair, but Black (2006) calls "handsome." … according to White (2005) "pretty, fair, and handsome."*
No comma before the final "and" when referencing: *(Brown, Black and White 1920)*	Comma before the final "and" when referencing: *(Brown, Black, and White 1920)*
When counting facts: *Firstly, secondly, thirdly*	When counting facts: *First, second, third*
For verbs ending in an l the l is doubled: *travel, travelled, travelling traveller*	For verbs ending in an l the l is not doubled: *travel, traveled, traveling, traveler*

For more examples of the differences between UK and US English, see this resource from Sribbr.

4.3 Figures and numbers

Words versus numbers

- Write ten and below out in full: *The meeting was first attended by ten people and afterwards by only seven*.

- Write numbers above ten in figures: *The meeting was first attended by 34 people and afterwards by only 14*.

- Depending on region/country, separate numbers greater than 999 by commas (in every group of three from the right), e.g. *10,500 inhabitants,* or spaces, e.g. *10 500 citizens*.

Decimals

- Depending on region, use points OR commas to indicate decimals, e.g. 65.24% and €3,999.65 OR 89,14% and $2 544,78.

- The important aspect is to be consistent and check the relevant style guidelines.

Currencies

- When using the currency symbol, place it in front of the amount without a space, e.g. €52,000.

- When using the currency abbreviation, leave a space before the amount, e.g. EUR 52,000.

Counting words

- Don't count unnecessarily in your text: *There are three goals: 1) xxx, 2) yyy and 3) zzz or First(ly), … Second(ly) …*

- Try to alternate with words and terms such as: *the next/another/a subsequent goal is … /This is followed by yyy … /Thereafter xxx follows …*

4.4 Punctuation
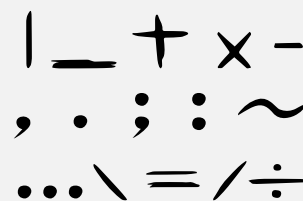
Full stop

When ending a sentence with "etc." do not use a double full stop:

> …*businesses, markets, etc.*

instead of

> …*businesses, markets, etc..*

Ellipses
Insert a space before and after an ellipses:
The manager remarked that he had been annoyed and ... very forgetful.

e.g. and i.e.

- Only use e.g. when you include the examples between brackets:

> … *tools (e.g. training and internships)…*

but

> … *tools, for example training and internships...*

- It generally does not matter whether you place a comma before or after e.g. and i.e.,
  but make sure that you are consistent:
  Don't write … *managers,* **i.e.** *those responsible for the organisation of* … in one sentence
  and then … *sales targets* **i.e.,** *number of sales per month* … in another sentence

Possessive case

- Add an 's to singular nouns, whether they end on an s or not:
  the organisation's management/the bus's route/the business's employees/the company's policy

- Add an 's to plural nouns that do not end on an s:
  the men's club/the children's playroom

- Add only an ' to plural nouns that end on an s:
  the businesses' employees/the companies' policy

- Take care when using the possessive case with acronyms, abbreviations and company names.
  Organisations' websites will often indicate how the name is written in the possessive form.
  An *NGO's policy* (one NGO) but *NGOs' policies* (multiple NGOs)
  Siemens' various branches ...

Hyphens

- When an adjective consists of more than one word, link the descriptive words with a hyphen: *energy-related aspects/fast-acting medication real-life-generated case studies/state-of-the-art design/two-year-old girl/well-known actor*

- When using a hyphen instead of "to", don't insert any spaces, e.g. *p. 1-10, from 1920-1950.*

- Don't use a hyphen to replace "and":

> *Between 1920 and 1950 …*

    not

> *Between 1920-1950 …*

To prevent a hyphenated word breaking up over two lines, use a hard hyphen by pressing Ctrl + Shift + hyphen.

Ampersand (&)

If the ampersand is part of an official brand or company name, retain it:

Standard & Poor's   **not**   *Standard and Poor's*

&

Brackets and parenthesis

Use brackets sparingly. Rather break up text and start a new sentence:

> *… and public services. These services include water, sewerage, refuse collection and road maintenance …*

rather than

> *… and public services (i.e. water, sewerage, refuse collection and road maintenance) …*

Air quotes

Avoid "air quotes" when terms have been established or there is no confusion possible:

> He asked for advice on lessons learnt …

rather than

> *He asked for "advice" on "lessons learnt" …*

4.5 Abbreviations and acronyms

- Write out an abbreviation or acronym in full the first time you use it:
  > *The World Health Organization (WHO) released a statement that … and then…*
  > *Following the breakout, the WHO sent an…*

  For lengthy texts, it can be useful to repeat the full abbreviation in each chapter.

- Only add "the" to abbreviations that you can pronounce:

> *Unesco plans to …*

but

> *The UN decided that …*

4.6 English as a second/third language

Use a good dictionary and thesaurus

If English is your second or third language, use a good dictionary and thesaurus when you write. When you use many incorrect words and prepositions in a single sentence, it can be hard for the editor or proofreader to determine what you meant to say.

Watch out for the influence of your mother tongue

- Don't use chevrons <<xxxx>> in English texts. Replace them with inverted commas if required.

- If your mother tongue does not have definite articles (the equivalent of "the" or "a(n)"), keep a watchful eye not to omit them.

- In English, the verbs are usually in the middle of the sentence, not at the end.

Note culture-specific references

Be aware that culture-specific references generally have very little meaning outside your own environment. For example, a reference to "Bauhaus" in a business text may mean nothing to the average American.

When to use "an" versus "a"

- Use "a" for words that start on a letter that's pronounced as a consonant in the context of the specific word (irrespective of whether it is a consonant or a vowel):
  a European/a useless man (the vowels e and u are pronounced as consonants: yeuropean yuseless)
  a hotel/a hospital/a history lesson

- Use "an" for words that start on a letter that's pronounced as a vowel in the context of the specific word (irrespective of whether it is a consonant or a vowel):
  an honest man (the h is pronounced as a vowel: onest)
  an HIV infection (h pronounced as a vowel: aitch-eye-vee)

Mistakes that often occur in Germanic texts

- Using "exist" as a direct translation of *es gibt*:

> *There were many different organisations …*

   not

> *Many different organisations existed …*

> *There are various examples of such behaviour …*

   not

> *There exist various examples of such behaviour …*

- Using "one" when you mean a/an:

> *a solution/answer/approach to …*   *an item in this …*

   not   **not**

> *one solution/answer/approach to …*   *one item in this…*

- Using hanging hyphens

   Hanging hyphens are normal in Germanic languages, but rare in English:

> *He ordered soft and hardware …*

   not

> *He ordered soft- and hardware …*

   If the relationship is not clear or the construction is more complex, repeat the last bit:

> *He ordered software and hardware …*

- Using "so-called" for *so-genannte*, because "so-called" has a negative connotation in English:

> *The so-called healer promised that he would …*

- Using a comma before that

> There is no comma before "that" as there is before *dass* in German.

4.7 AI as a supporting tool

AI content tools such as ChatGPT or Copy.ai, which use artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms in the form of large language models (LLM) to create, translate or clean up written content, have taken the world by storm. While there are different views on the benefits and risks, the fact is that these tools are here to stay and will likely become increasingly refined.

Advantages

Efficiency is one of the key attractions of AI writing tools. It can generate and translate content and respond to information requests in a jiffy, saving time and effort and enabling you to be more productive. Controversy aside, this is not a new premise. Just think of the industrial revolution and many of the other technologies we use today. You won't do your laundry by hand if you can simply use a washing machine; why should writing be any different? Other advantages include reduced basic errors (e.g. grammatical inaccuracies) and consistency.

Concerns

Most of the concerns around AI content tools are ethical in nature. Plagiarism is a good example: Since the tools use pre-existing content as reference, content can be too similar to existing sources. Other concerns include manipulation and deception (e.g. creating fake news). That's why it's vital to use these tools responsibly.

The importance of the human touch

There is substantial evidence of the benefits of human-machine collaboration in several fields, with technology complementing human creativity and critical thinking. In the context of content tools, this means editors and proofreaders still play an important role. For example, when translating from one language into another, AI tools can generate translations that are not idiomatic or appropriate for the culture – think of sayings and idioms that cannot be translated directly into another language, or the cultural/symbolic meaning of certain words or phrases.

Let us refine your text, for the best of both worlds

The Refine team also uses AI content tools to save time and work more effectively. However, we use our expertise and experience to make the necessary corrections and improvements, since the LLMs are not perfect. We remain fully committed to ensuring that your text is of the highest quality and therefore encourage you to use our editing and proofreading services even if you make use of these tools. Think of us as the ones doing the ironing after the washing machine did its job!

5. Academic writing
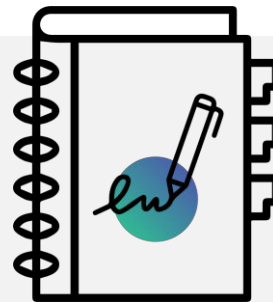
5.1 Tenses

In academic writing, you will sometimes have to use various tenses, as in this example:

White undertook [past tense] *this research in the summer of 2023 once Brown had published* [past perfect passive] *his study on efg (2021). The first step was* [past tense] *to undertake a survey, which is* [present tense] *an accepted approach for studying efg. Many prior studies have also indicated* [present perfect tense] *that a survey is* [present tense] *an appropriate method. By applying this approach, it was* [past tense] *possible to establish whether x and z are* [present tense] *comparable, which scholars have always doubted* [present perfect tense].

Guidelines to help you determine which tense to use:

Indirect/reported speech

Only use the present tense when referring to a generally accepted truth.

The manager mentioned [past tense] *that he had been pleased* [past perfect tense] *to see that grass is* [present tense] *still green. He could not understand* [past tense] *why anyone would want* [past tense] *to change the colour now that irrigation is* [present tense] *readily available.*

Past tense

- The past tense is used when an event occurred in the past or a fact was generally accepted in the past.

- Some past tense words to remember: build = built, lend = lent, send = sent, bend = bent.

In the 1960s, there were studies that seemed to prove that smoking was harmless …
This study was undertaken before the dotcom crash …
This examination was carried out in June 2005 ...

Past perfect tense

This tense is mostly used together with the past tense. It is safe to say that when you use the past tense, you will likely at some time or another need to use the past perfect tense.

a) Use it when there is no definite indication of time in the past.	*Before White's study, there had not been many studies on this topic …* *This argument had led to a great many counterarguments …*
b) Use it when one event happened before or after another event in the past. Note that the action further in the past is in the past perfect tense and the more recent action is in the past tense.	*After the team had reached consensus on the questions, the survey was undertaken.* *White's findings had first been published in June 2000, after which there were a great many responses in various journals.* *Prior to Black's study, published in 2000, there had never been any other on this topic.* *Throughout our examination, we had never been able to verify that Brown's ….*

Present tense

a) Use it when an event occurs in the present time and something is generally regarded as true.	*Currently, there are many studies that focus on…* *Although this study was done in 1970, it is still applicable…*
b) Use it when telling a story, such as when writing a case study.	*John Smith, CEO of Ajax and Co., thrusts his hands deep into his pockets, walks to the window, and stares down at the hustle and bustle below him. He is very worried.*
c) Use it in a literature review. If you use the past tense in a literature review, this implies that the findings of the authors whose work you are reviewing are no longer applicable.	*Black and White (1970) maintain that the best method is….* *Brown and Black (2005) indicate that…, although White and Brown (2006) prove that…*
b) Use it (often in the passive voice) to describe what the reader will read next, when describing the outline of a paper, dissertation or book.	*This paper is structured as follows: In the first section, the background to … is provided, followed by a literature review. The following section describes the methodology and ….* *A recommendation for practice concludes the paper.*

Present perfect tense

This tense is mostly used together with the present tense. It is safe to say that when you use the present tense, you will likely at some time or another need to use the present perfect tense.

a) Use it when there is no definite indication of time in the present.	*There have been many studies on this topic.* *This argument has led to a great many counterarguments.*
b) Use it with signal words like throughout, since, ever, never, just, etc.	*Throughout this examination, we have never been able to verify that Black's assertion is true ….* *Since the acceptance of the abc theory, scholars have used it to verify whether…*
c) Use it when you're describing events that happen before or after the other. When both are in the present, the action that occurs first is in the present perfect tense (can be in the passive voice) and the most recent one is in the present tense (can be in the passive voice).	*Although the findings by Black and White (1970) have been verified, Brown (2000) insists that they cannot be applied in every instance.* *While there have been many prior studies on …, none of them focuses on …* *Once the team has reached consensus on the questions, the survey is undertaken.*
d) When one happened in the past and the other in the present, the action that occurs first is in the past tense (can be in the passive voice) and the most recent one is in the present perfect tense (can be in the passive voice).	*Since White's findings were published in the 1990s, there have been a great number of studies on this topic.* *In the 1990s, many studies focussed on … but none of them has been empirically validated.*

Present continuous tense

There is little need to use this tense (am/are/is + ing) in academic writing.	*This paper discusses various aspects of ….* **not** *This paper is discussing various aspects of …*

5.2 Transcribe or translate interviews and speeches

Trying to be true to the letter of a speech or interview will only sound incoherent. Rather aim for being true to the spirit of a speech or interview, especially in the context of your version representing the official transcript of an event that took place some time ago and that one would like to see quoted as often as possible, without minor grammar issues preventing people from doing so.

Stick to the follow principles:
- Use paragraph breaks and punctuation to facilitate reading.
- Correct small grammar errors such as incorrect verb and subject agreement
  (*The colours of the rainbow are …* not *The colours of the rainbow is …*) and incorrect tenses.
- Omit back-channelling indicators (*uh huh, uhm*), false starts (*you see it's… they don't know…*) and word repetitions (*the the the, or no no no*).

5.3 Avoid the passive voice

If you write for a journal that dislikes passive formulations, the following "tricks" may help:

Write …	… instead of …
The term is definable …	*The term has to be defined…*
The following barriers are identifiable/can be identified …	*The following barriers have been identified …*
These issues link to/relate to/build on/result …	*These issues are linked to/related to/based on/derived from …*
Assign this finding to …	*This finding is allocated to …*

5.4 References

There are various reference systems with specific formatting rules. Make sure that you know which system you must use, familiarise yourself with the rules and apply them consistently.

Use of "cf", "see" and "e.g." before references
- Avoid using "cf". (The use of cf in parentheses is allowed in the APA referencing style.)
- Use "see" only if you want to invite a comparison of authors' viewpoints.
- Use "e.g." only if you truly refer to an example of the sources.

Publication timelines
When you mention "recent publications", don't refer to publications that are older than ten years.

6. Finalise your text for editing

Before you send your text for editing, it can be useful to ask yourself the following questions:

1 Do all the parts form a whole?

This is by no means as strange a question as it may sound. For longer texts especially one often focuses on the various parts of the text at different times, revising each individual part repeatedly. This process may discourage from you doing another read-through, but don't skip this step!

2 Am I repeating myself?

Don't underestimate the intelligence of the potential reader – people generally find redundancy extremely tedious, however it may be disguised. There are instances when it is useful to provide a brief recap to save the reader the bother of having to page back. But this should be the exception and not the rule.

Also look out for repetition on a wording or micro-level. Tautology is when you repeat yourself by simply using different words.

|	
...such as, for example... it is clearly evident honest and trustworthy in the foreseeable future corresponds to, i.e. resembles...	anonymity, no one knows the other the pricing of only one single certificate finally, the last section to mentally interpret

3 Am I providing all vital information?

Familiarity with a topic often leads to authors taking vital aspects of the topic for granted. This leads to gaps in the text that confuse readers. For example, reading about new methods that "bridge a gap" or "surmount the previous problem" without this gap or problem explained, is very frustrating. The operative word is "vital", i.e. the information that the reader must know to fully comprehend the text, take the required action, or whatever the case may be.

4 The last test: read through the text – aloud

Once you are satisfied that you have addressed the questions above, read the text to yourself out loud. Overly long sentences, incorrect constructions and omissions become very evident when you listen to yourself speaking the words. Make sure that you read what is actually there and not what your mind wishes or expects to be there.

7. Helpful resources

As mentioned at the beginning of this guide, these notes summarise the most common writing mistakes and may not provide answers to all your questions. In addition to trusted printed dictionaries and your spellchecker, there are many resources available online to help you. A few of the most useful, credible resources include the following:
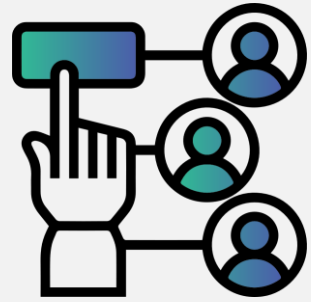
General
- Cambridge dictionary (UK English)
- Merriman-Webster dictionary (US English)
- GrammarBook.com
- Grammarly

For academic writing
- Purdue University Writing Lab
- University of Copenhagen's toolbox for academic writing
- Scribbr knowledge base
- Indiana University of Pennsylvania resources for writers

Style guides
- APA style
- The Chicago manual of style
- AP stylebook
- MLA handbook *(mainly for the academic sector)*
- Microsoft writing style guide *(aimed at the tech industry)*

Enjoy the journey to quality content!

The Refine team

Stay in touch: hub@refineteam.com

Refine
Your final stop