

LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

Improve your writing
skills

A Writing Centre
workshop

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Introduction

Welcome to this workshop, in which we will consider your writing skills and the things you can do to improve them. Within this handout you will find several exercises, which you may complete and return to the Writing Centre for feedback if you wish.

We hope you find this workshop useful. It is one of a range of services provided to you by the Writing Centre. Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you would like to know more about what the Writing Centre offers.

We would like to thank Dr Carson Bergstrom of Salford University for sharing his 'Wordscope' materials, some of which have formed the inspiration for parts of this workshop.

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Exercise 1 – skills audit

This exercise is intended to help you identify your strengths as a writer, and the areas that you may wish to improve. Answer 'yes' or 'no'.

1. Do you enjoy writing?
2. Do you find writing a challenge?
3. Do you think carefully about the structure of your work?
4. Do you review and edit your writing?
5. Do you write conversationally, as though you are talking to your reader?
6. Do you read your work aloud to check the sense of it?
7. Do you feel that you understand what a sentence is?
8. Do you try to write clearly and simply?
9. Do you feel that you spend enough time planning your work?
10. Are you often unsure whether you have used the right word?
11. Are you confident about punctuation?
12. Do you know instinctively when your writing looks or sounds wrong?

There are no right or wrong answers. Here are some points to think about:

1. Some people find writing intensely enjoyable (think of the number of people who write poems, novels and plays in their spare time). Others find it a struggle. If you find writing difficult, this does not mean that you cannot do it well. People who do not have a natural affinity with writing can still learn to be extremely effective writers, and like everything, the more you practice, the easier it becomes, even if you would never list 'writing' as a leisure activity. There are many anecdotes about how famous writers struggle too. James Joyce thought he had been very productive if he managed one sentence in a day. Oscar Wilde once said that he had spent all day editing a poem: in the morning he decided to remove a comma, in the afternoon he decided to put it back.
2. Writing well is always a challenge, no matter how accomplished a writer you are. Good writers probably learn to enjoy the challenge, and find immense satisfaction in producing good work despite all the difficulties.
3. Almost all good writers think very carefully about the structure of their work. It is vital to organise your material so that the reader can understand what you are saying as easily as possible.
4. The process of editing and reviewing is crucial to good writing. Somebody once said 'There is no such thing as good writing, just good re-writing'. Critically analysing your own work is a very important tool. Does it make sense? Could it be clearer? Will my readers understand what I mean? Asking yourself questions like these can really improve your work.
5. In academic writing, a conversational tone is usually to be avoided. Academic writing should be formal, analytical and logical, using the third person in most instances. Conversations tend to jump around

between points and include unsubstantiated personal opinion. In contrast, a coherent argument backed up by evidence is required when we write academically.

6. Many people find that reading their work aloud helps them to hear where things do not make sense, or do not follow logically. If you can get someone else to read your work aloud to you, then this is even more helpful, because you can get their opinion as a reader too.
7. Sentences are the basic building blocks of writing. If you can write in complete sentences, and recognise what is not a complete sentence, you are well on your way to becoming an effective writer. We will cover basic sentence structure in this workshop.
8. Clarity and simplicity are two characteristics of good writing. Always try to write using the fewest and simplest words possible. This should help you to avoid confusion, waffle and muddled thinking.
9. If you have attended the workshop on essay writing, you will know that planning your work is absolutely crucial. You should spend at least as much time planning as you do writing. In fact, a good plan should reduce dramatically the amount of time you do spend writing. It should also reduce the amount of time you spend staring at a blank screen wondering what you are going to write next.
10. The English language is thought to contain over 500 million words (*Collins Concise Dictionary: 21st Century Edition*, 2001) so it is quite understandable if you are not always sure you have the right word for the job! Computer spell-checkers are no help in this case because they can only tell if a word is spelt correctly, not whether it is being used in the correct way. If in doubt, always check in a dictionary. A useful internet resource is the *Merriam-Webster OnLine Dictionary*, accessed

via the following URL: <http://www.m-w.com/home.htm>

11. Punctuation can be a pain. However, it is worth learning the rules because, in the words of *The Times* 'it is a courtesy designed to help readers to understand a story without stumbling'. (Cited in King 2000, p.81) One way of becoming familiar with correct punctuation is to read a broadsheet newspaper such as *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph* or *The Independent*.

12. As you will know if you attended the workshop 'Introduction to academic writing', we are all skilled writers, even if we do not realise it! With practice it is possible to tune in to this natural skill. Your instinctive knowledge will normally tell you if something looks or sounds wrong. Learn to trust your intuition and it will usually act as a very good critical tool. Again, reading good quality prose and listening to or watching current affairs or news programmes will help to develop your skill.

Take a moment to consider what we have discussed.

What do you think your strengths are as a writer?

Can you identify any areas that you would like to improve?

Basic sentence structure

As we have said, the sentence is the building block of good writing. Collins Concise Dictionary defines a sentence thus: 'A sequence of words capable of standing alone to make an assertion, ask a question or give a command, usually consisting of a subject and a predicate.' (2001) The important words to note in this definition are '**capable of standing alone**'. If a phrase in your writing is not able to stand on its own, it must have something missing. It is not a sentence and therefore it will not make sense. When you read your work aloud, you should be able to identify any phrases that do not stand alone because they will sound odd.

Exercise 2 – what is a sentence?

Look at the following examples:

Sentences form the core of an academic essay. (Bergstrom 2003, p.1)

Conscientious writers will read their work aloud or mentally aloud as they proceed; that way the sentences are likely to form themselves into a logical, interesting, economical and, with luck, elegant flow of thought. (King 2000, p.83)

If writers consciously regard style on the level of the sentence (and not all writers do), they may aim not just to write long or short sentences, but to achieve balance by matching a short sentence with one or two longer sentences. (Jacobus 1998, p.23)

Try to be direct. (Fairbairn & Winch 1991, p.73)

These are all examples of complete sentences. What do they have in common? How do they differ?

From the above examples it is clear that sentences can be short and simple or very long and complicated. However, they have the following common features:

A sentence begins with a capital letter.

A sentence ends with a full stop.

What else must a sentence have?

At the most basic level, a sentence needs two things: a **subject** and a **verb**.

Subjects could be: book, person, Maria, car

Verbs could be: to fall, to walk, to laugh, to stop

If we combine these elements, we make sentences. For example:

The books fell.

A person walks.

Maria laughed.

The car stops.

So far, we know that a sentence must begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop. It must contain a subject and a verb.

Sentence = subject + verb.

As you can see, the above examples are very limited and useful only for the simplest kind of communication. However, sentences may also contain other elements.

Adding an object

The books fell on **him**.

A person walks to **town**.

Maria laughed at **her**.

The car stops at the **sign**.

The object of the sentence has something done to it. The object often follows the verb (the action word). This structure allows a sentence to be a little more precise with the information it communicates.

Sentence = subject + verb + **object**.

Adding another object

The books fell on him in the **library**.

A person walks to town in **trainers**.

Maria laughed at her and **Michael**.

The car stops at the sign for the **garage**.

A sentence can have two objects. The main object (e.g. him, town, her, sign) is the thing that is acted on by the verb (doing word). If we add another object

(sometimes called the indirect object), it can tell us a bit more about what is happening.

Sentence = subject + verb + object + **indirect object**.

Please do not concern yourself with the grammatical terms that have been used above. The intention of this workshop is to demonstrate how you can build layers of meaning from simple sentence structures.

Describing the subject or object of your sentence

You can add other words to your sentence that give more detail about the subject or object. For example:

The **heavy** books fell on him in the **public** library.

A **sensible** person walks to town in **comfy** trainers.

Cruel Maria laughed at her and **poor** Michael.

The **old** car stops at the sign for the **nearest** garage.

Sentence = **description** + subject + verb + object + **description** + indirect object.

Again, you do not need to memorise this structure, the intention is to show how layers of meaning can be added.

Adding more information

The heavy books fell on him in the public library **at** Childwall Fiveways.

A sensible person walks to town in comfy trainers **for** extra speed.

Cruel Maria laughed at her and poor **Michael** as they struggled **with** the heavy box.

The old car stops at the sign for the nearest garage **before** it breaks down.

You will note that we have used a certain sort of joining word to link the different parts of these sentences together. These are called **prepositions**, and include words like: to, at, before, between, above, over, out, on, in, with, without, during, under etc. You can use one, two or more prepositions within a sentence. They can be very useful for expanding the amount of information communicated by the sentence. Words that follow a preposition are sometimes called a prepositional phrase.

Sentence = description + subject + verb + object + description + indirect object + **preposition** > (**prepositional phrase**).

Adding even more information

The heavy books fell on him in the public library at Childwall Fiveways **before the librarian could do anything**.

A sensible person walks to town in comfy trainers for extra speed **without the risk of blisters**.

Cruel Maria laughed at her and poor Michael as they struggled with the heavy box **while the rain poured down**.

The old car stops at the sign for the nearest garage before it breaks down **in the middle of the road**.

Again, we have expanded the amount of information contained within the sentence by the use of prepositions, which allow us to introduce additional prepositional phrases.

Sentence = description + subject + verb + object + description + indirect object + preposition > (prepositional phrase) + **preposition** > (**prepositional phrase**).

As we have seen, sentences can be very short or extremely long and complex, much more so than those we have developed here. However, a sentence should always explain a single idea or concept. The complexity of that idea or concept will dictate the length and complexity of your sentence. Beware of very long sentences as they can confuse your readers. If in doubt, it always pays to divide the sentence up into two or more shorter ones. As a general guide, if you read the sentence aloud and you have to take more than one or two breaths it is probably too long.

Do you notice anything about the sentences we have been building?
What have we not used?

Although we have built up some complex sentences, we have not used commas, semi-colons, colons, dashes or brackets. The only punctuation we have needed so far has been a capital letter at the beginning of the sentence and a full stop at the end. This might show you just how over-used most punctuation marks are.

Practice

If you would like to practice what we have discussed, write 150 words about what you did at the weekend, using only the sentence structures described above. You may return this exercise to the Writing Centre for feedback if you wish.

Using commas

Look at the following sentences:

Laura twirled around a rose in her hand.

Laura twirled around, a rose in her hand.

Can you see how the placing of the comma has completely changed the meaning of the sentence?

The comma is a subtle device that, if used properly, can greatly enhance the clarity of your writing.

Collins Concise Dictionary (2001) defines a comma thus: 'the punctuation mark, indicating a slight pause and used where there is a listing of items or to separate a non-restrictive clause from a main clause.' (p.297) From this definition, we can discern three main uses.

1. Indicating a slight pause

Some people can tell where commas are required by reading their work aloud and listening for where a pause seems to fall naturally. This method is not always foolproof, but if, as we have mentioned before, you can tune-in to your instinctive knowledge of the English language, it can be a useful technique. Using your instinctive knowledge, see if you can add the necessary commas to the following examples. Some of the examples do not need any commas at all; others need several.

1. It is better for example to use single words and phrases rather than circumlocutory ways of saying things. (Fairbairn & Winch, 1991)

2. As a general rule where including a comma helps clarity put it in. (King, 2000 a)

3. Using commas effectively to make your writing more readable is a bit of a balancing act that requires thought and practice. (King, 2000 a)

4. While the full-stop brings proceedings to a screeching halt the comma with its mortar-like ability to build complex sentences enlarges upon thoughts joins them to further thoughts and afterthoughts binds in extra information and generally has a good time. (King, 2000 b)

Did you find the above exercise difficult? Was it easier when the sentences were read aloud?

The deployment of the comma is a subtle skill, and on many occasions the decision on where and how to use it will be based on style rather than grammatical correctness. However, it is easy to see when commas have been overused.

Example – too many commas spoil the sentence

Usually, although, not infallibly, Mrs Jones visited Sayers', the bakers, for cakes, bread, and, scones, every Monday, unless, unfortunately, she was unwell.

This sentence contains 12 commas. Can you see how the excessive number of commas obscures the sense of the words?

Usually, although not infallibly, Mrs Jones visited Sayers' the bakers for cakes, bread and scones every Monday unless, unfortunately, she was unwell.

The number of commas has been reduced to 5. The sentence is easier to read and understand.

Now you try.

Exercise – removing excess commas

The following example is taken from the L.A. Times (cited by Baker 2001)

Like the Academy Award-winning Jolie, De Matteo, who stars as Christopher's (Michael Imperoli) Mafioso moll, Adriana, in HBO's "The Sopranos," came out of nowhere, with an attitude that insists she belongs in this business, but the confidence not to care if she's not accepted. (10.06.01)

Try to re-write this sentence so that it is easier to understand. You may wish to change some of the words and structure as well as removing some of the commas.

2. Listing items

Another use of commas is to help you list items. For example:

Her shopping bag contained apples, oranges, grapes, bananas and a pineapple.

Can you see how the commas help to separate the items in the list?

Now you try.

Exercise – commas clarify lists

Can you add the necessary commas to the following sentences? Some of the examples may not need any commas at all; others may need several.

1. Red orange yellow green blue indigo and violet are the colours of the rainbow.
2. The big white house stood alone on the hill.
3. Peter John and Mark played for the same team but James David and Matthew did not.
4. That car is available in red green or blue with the option of metallic paint automatic transmission or alloy wheels.
5. Commas can be tricky because you never know where when or how to use them.

Note that it is now considered unnecessary to put a comma before the word ‘and’, although older texts may still do so. For example, ‘Peter, John and Mark’ is usually considered preferable to ‘Peter, John, and Mark’. This extra comma is sometimes known as the ‘Oxford comma’.

3. Separating a non-restrictive clause

A ‘non-restrictive clause’ means that the phrase can be removed from the sentence and the sentence will still make sense. For example:

Jack, I hasten to add, was not the ringleader.

Jack was not the ringleader.

Thus, it can be seen, Clark’s theory does not stand up to scrutiny.

Thus Clark’s theory does not stand up to scrutiny.

The dress, despite being expensive, did not suit her.

The dress did not suit her.

When the non-restrictive phrases are removed, what remains can stand alone as a sentence. This does not mean that non-restrictive phrases contain irrelevant information. They usually contain additional or qualifying information that adds to the meaning of the sentence, but is not essential to its grammatical sense.

As you can see from the above examples, a pair of commas is usually used to mark off the non-restrictive phrase.

Now you try.

Exercise – using commas to separate clauses

Can you add the necessary commas to mark the non-restrictive, or qualifying, clauses in the following sentences?

1. The book according to Richard was very boring.
2. She felt as she often did that no-one was listening to her.
3. Mary despite repeated reminders forgot to post the letter.

Conclusion – commas

As we have seen, the use of the comma is as much an art as it is a science. There are many different uses that we do not have time to cover today. However, those mentioned above are the three main uses, and if you can master them you are well on your way to becoming an effective user of commas.

We have not covered other punctuation marks in this workshop because you should be able to write almost any kind of sentence using only a capital letter, a full stop and some commas. Colons, semi-colons, brackets and dashes will be covered in later workshops.

Further reading

If you wish to explore writing skills in more depth, the following books are recommended:

King, G 2000 *Collins Wordpower: Punctuation*, Harpercollins, Glasgow.

King, G 2000 *Collins Wordpower: Good writing*, HarperCollins, Glasgow.

Jacobus, L 1998 *Substance, Style and Strategy*, Oxford University Press, New York.

King, S 2002 *On Writing*, Pocket Books.

Last word

We hope you have found this session on writing skills useful. There is a lot of information to take in, but as with everything, the more you write, and the more you practice the techniques we have discussed here today, the easier it will get.

If you would like to discuss your writing further, you are welcome to make an appointment with the Writing Centre Co-ordinator. Appointments last for 30 minutes, and you can book them by contacting the Writing Centre via the details given below.

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