

When people speak to one another, they want to make sure they are understood. This is because the goal of communication is to pass along a message of some kind. If a person mumbles or uses unrecognizable words, the meaning of the message will be lost. The same is true for writing. Authors formulate their thoughts and communicate them through written words. In this way, any kind of writing—whether personal, academic, or professional—is a form of conveying a message to the reader. It's the job of writers to make sure their messages are as clear as possible.

Audience and Tone

Before getting to work, writers must first determine for whom they are writing. The audience greatly determines the tone of a piece of writing; the tone can be formal, informal, or many other attitudes. For example, a letter to your mother would be more informal than a letter to your congressional representative. The content of the letters would likely be different as well. This is because different audiences have different expectations. Someone reading an editorial about a man's experience as a lifeguard would expect the piece to be written in first person. The use of "I" as the subject would not seem out of place in this instance because the editorial is meant to communicate an individual's personal experience. However, academic writing must be unbiased and factual, and the use of first-person pronouns would work against this intention. For this reason, using the first-person voice in a research essay would likely be inappropriate.

Tips for Writing Formal Sentences

- Avoid first-person pronouns, such as "In *my* opinion . . ."
- Choose the most specific and relevant words to describe people, events, and places.
- Avoid unsophisticated adjectives, such as *good* or *bad*.
- Use formal expressions and technical terms, when appropriate.
- Avoid phrasal verbs that are commonly used in spoken English, such as *put into* or *find out*.
- Be succinct and clear.

One way that authors can determine the tone and audience for a piece of writing is to consider the purpose of their writing. Does the writer simply want to entertain the reader? If so, then a short story, letter, or editorial article with an informal tone might work. Does the writer want to educate the reader or make an argument about a particular subject? In this case, a formal academic or journalistic essay is the best choice. Keeping in mind the purpose for a piece of writing and who might be reading the finished work helps the writer to make informed decisions about word choice, format, and structure.

Grammar

To use correct grammar, writers must have a strong understanding of the parts of speech, including their functions, as well as how they interact within a sentence. One of the most important elements of a grammatically correct sentence is the agreement between the subject and the verb.

The subject of the sentence is usually a noun or a clause. It names the person, place, or thing that the sentence is about. The subject of a sentence is either singular or plural—it refers to one person or thing, or it refers to multiple people or things. The verb of the sentence is the word that expresses the action or the state of being of the subject. Like subjects, verbs are also associated with quantity—there is either one or multiple people or things performing the action. Singular verbs in the present tense often end in *-s*, while plural verbs do not. For example, in the sentence “George talks,” *George* is a singular subject, so it takes the singular verb form *talks*. However, in the sentence “They talk,” *they* is a plural subject referring to more than one person, so it takes the plural verb form *talk*. Because both subject and the verb share the same form of quantity, they are said to agree with one another.

Writers can also practice proper grammar by using the correct verb tenses. Actions can take place at different times: in the past, in the present, or in the future. To convey time in writing, verbs are assigned specific forms for each time period, which are called *tenses*. For example, a historian writing an essay about Thomas Jefferson would use past tense verbs to communicate to the reader that Jefferson’s actions occurred long ago. If the historian used present or future tense verbs by mistake, the events would seem confusing to the reader, and the author would risk losing credibility.

Sentence Structure

All sentences are composed of the same basic parts. By understanding these sentence components, writers are able to combine and arrange the parts into meaningful expressions.

Most sentences take one of four forms. The most basic of these is the simple sentence—a sentence composed of a single independent clause, or a subject and verb that require no other words to convey a complete thought. For example: *George Washington was the first U.S. president.*

The second type of sentence structure is known as the compound sentence. These sentences are composed of two independent clauses that are joined by a conjunction such as *and* or *but*. A compound sentence could be easily split into two separate sentences without any loss in meaning. For example: *George Washington was the first U.S. president, and John Adams was the second.*

The third type of sentence structure, the complex sentence, introduces the concept of dependent clauses. Unlike independent clauses, dependent clauses are incomplete thoughts that must be read along with other clauses in order to be meaningful. Complex sentences contain both an independent clause and at least one dependent clause. For example: *George Washington, who was born in Virginia, was the first U.S. president.*

Lastly, compound-complex sentences are a combination of types two and three. This type of sentence contains at least two independent clauses and at least one dependent clause. For example: *George Washington, who was born in Virginia, was the first U.S. president, and John Adams, who was born in Massachusetts, was the second.*

Experienced writers recognize that variety helps sustain a reader's interest. By varying the types of sentence structure used in a piece, writers avoid tiring a reader with the same repeated format and add liveliness to their work.

Spelling and Punctuation

Another way in which writers can ensure clarity and credibility in their writing is by making informed choices about spelling and punctuation. Misspelled words can reveal carelessness by the writer, and a mistake in punctuation could alter the entire meaning of a text.

Commonly Misspelled Words

to, too, two	here, hear
through, threw	flour, flower
where, wear	blew, blue
bare, bear	son, sun
a lot	buy, by
they're, there, their	your, you're

Consider the following sentence: "The sun was the color of a big hot dog." Here, the sun's color in the sky is compared to that of a large food item. Now read the following revision: "The son was the color of a big, hot dog." In this version, errors in spelling and punctuation greatly alter the meaning of the sentence. The word *son* now refers to a human boy, and the added comma between *big* and *hot* means that these words are adjectives used to describe a living animal.

By familiarizing yourself with the type of spelling and punctuation mistakes that others often make, you can better avoid repeating the same mistakes in your own writing.

Citing Sources

Writers can also achieve clarity in their writing by being clear about where their ideas originate. The primary tools for most writers are their own thoughts and opinions, but some forms of writing also incorporate outside sources to help clarify or justify a point. For example, an academic essay about endangered animals might make use of another writer's thoughts on habitat loss, or the findings from a report about poachers.

There are two ways to use someone else's work within your own. The first is to use a direct quotation of the original words. The second is to restate the outside facts or ideas in your own words, which is called *paraphrasing*. In either case, writers must give credit to the sources from which they borrow. By failing to cite, or credit, a source, the writer commits plagiarism, or falsely asserts that the work belongs to him and no one else.

Citations can be handled in several different ways. The information to include in a citation and the order in which it is presented can vary between institutions. Below are examples of three main format styles for citations of a book:

MLA (Modern Language Association) Style:

Last name, First name. *Title of Book*. City of Publication: Publisher, Year of publication.
Medium of publication.

APA (American Psychological Association) Style:

Author, A. A. (Year of publication). *Title of work: Capital letter also for subtitle*.
Location: Publisher.

Chicago Manual of Style:

Last name, First name. *Title of Book*. Place of publication: Publisher, Year of publication.

The placement of citations can also vary. Citations may be included within the text as parenthetical citations (within parentheses), or they can be included in a Works Cited list at the end of a text. No matter which formatting you follow, the important thing is to give credit where credit is due. You can access citations in the Details tab of Discovery Education resources. When you open a media resource, the Details button in the top left corner provides citation information for that resource in all three styles.

The written word is a versatile tool that can take many forms. Writing is also very powerful, capable of delivering entertainment, education, or even new ideas about the world. To meet these goals, writers must strive for clarity in their work. This means knowing why they are writing and for whom they are writing. Writers who use proper tone, grammar, spelling, and punctuation will be better equipped to reach the audience they want with the message they intend.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1. Which type of sentence structure is composed of a single independent clause?**
 - A. simple sentence**
 - B. complex sentence**
 - C. compound sentence**
 - D. compound-complex sentence**

- 2. Which of the following sentences demonstrates correct subject-verb agreement?**
 - A. She dislike watermelon.**
 - B. Mary and Alan walks home together.**
 - C. They refuse to return the library books.**
 - D. The government are serious about healthcare.**

- 3. Which of the following sentences contains a misspelled word?**
 - A. We ate chocolate cake for desert.**
 - B. John knew more than he told them.**
 - C. Did you get all of the answers right on the test?**
 - D. Emily measured one cup of flour for the recipe.**

- 4. Which type of punctuation is used to separate two adjectives that describe the same noun?**
 - A. a colon**
 - B. a period**
 - C. a hyphen**
 - D. a comma**

- 5. In what cases would a writer cite an outside source in order to avoid plagiarism? Provide at least two examples, with details and evidence from the passage to support your answer.**