Writing clearly and accurately in essays: can you spot slips?

Introduction

Academic writing uses a special style of language that is usually distinguishable from other styles such as spoken colloquial (or everyday) English.

- It is the style that is appropriate, and expected, for university coursework.

- It is a style that you may already have mastered, or it may be something that you have been working towards in previous study.

In this section, you'll get the chance to test your own awareness of some common writing problems, to consider their impact on the reader, and to think in rough terms about where you are in your academic writing development.

To underline the point that academic English is a special style, it’s probably worth pointing out that these induction notes are generally not written in it, though the examples discussed in it are!

The decision has been taken to make the notes more ‘conversational’ in style, since they are not designed as a piece of formal academic writing but are something written for a different purpose!

ACTIVITY: Top trip-ups guaranteed to get your tutor tutting!

- Read through the following text and see if you can spot the writing errors. They represent some of the common ones currently seen in student work.

- You may feel that the features of the writing style actually make the content seem dubious too. This is partly because errors in the writing make the presentation of ideas seem disorganised, incomplete or oddly linked. This is a valid point. However, try to focus on the accuracy of the writing for now, rather than the content.

- When you’ve made your decisions, check your ideas with the worked example that follows.
Version 1: spot the errors!

Line 1
There are many varieties of language. Spoken language, e.g. speech, can vary according to the speaker’s, the physical context in which language is used in (e.g. time, place, people involved) and the reason for the interaction, it can vary in a number of ways. Such as regional and social accents, i.e. the Liverpool accent and the Scottish accent. Accent refers to the way the words of a language are pronounced. The vocabulary and grammar of a language can also vary between regions and between social groups, this variation is termed dialect. An individual’s age and gender can also effect the language varieties they use. Research in the 1960s and 1970s suggested that woman are more likely than men to be sensitive to the prestige value of the accent and dialect most closely linked to high class groups in society. For example the varieties used by the royal family and the aristocracy in the UK. One suggested reason for this was that woman at the time often relied on language to signal the social status they wished to be identified with, as it was then still relatively rare for woman to hold statusful careers. Although, society and the position of woman in particular has arguably changed considerably in the last forty years, and it can be hypothesised that these changes are likely to be reflected in language and it’s varieties. Its sometimes claimed that less social divisions now exist in society and that their are less obvious boundaries in regional and social varieties of english as a result. Whereas, in the early 1900s, the writer George Bernard Shaw commented that as soon as an Englishman opened his mouth, he betrayed his origins.

So, how did you do?

- **Check your ideas against this next version** (Version 2: Error spotter). This has key errors marked up in yellow. There may be some extra problems you noted too. Some will be discussed below.

- **Then read the Line-by-line commentary.**

- **Then read the verdict on your performance** in the ‘Rough Guide’ to your error-spotting skills!
There are many varieties of language. Spoken language, e.g. speech, can vary according to the speaker’s, the physical context in which language is used in (e.g. time, place, people involved) and the reason for the interaction, it can vary in a number of ways. Such as regional and social accents, i.e. the Liverpool accent and the Scottish accent. Accent refers to the way the words of a language are pronounced. The vocabulary and grammar of a language can also vary between regions and between social groups, this variation is termed dialect. An individual’s age and gender can also effect the language varieties they use. Research in the 1960s and 1970s suggested that woman are more likely than men to be sensitive to the prestige value of the accent and dialect most closely linked to high class groups in society. For example the varieties used by the royal family and the aristocracy in the UK. One suggested reason for this was that woman at the time often relied on language to signal the social status they wished to be identified with, as it was then still relatively rare for woman to hold statusful careers. Although, society and the position of woman in particular has arguably changed considerably in the last forty years, and it can be hypothesised that these changes are likely to be reflected in language and it’s varieties. Its sometimes claimed that less social divisions now exist in society and that their are less obvious boundaries in regional and social varieties of english as a result. Whereas, in the early 1900s, the writer George Bernard Shaw commented that as soon as an Englishman opened his mouth, he betrayed his origins.

Line-by-line commentary

The following commentary outlines key points on errors in the text that are really ‘non-negotiable’. In other words, despite differences that exist between us in terms of personal preferences in writing style, these features of the text are not acceptable in academic writing.

You may feel that there are other problems with the text in terms of content or broader issues to do with length of sentences, word choice etc. In order to keep this activity relatively short, these won’t be debated here, but it’s a good sign if your critical appetite is now whetted!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>e.g.</td>
<td><em>e.g.</em> means ‘for example’ and implies that the writer has selected an example from a range of possibilities. However, in this context, ‘speech’ is the only likely choice. Therefore, the abbreviation, <em>i.e.</em>, meaning ‘that is’, should have been selected. This is a surprisingly common error in student’s work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>'s</td>
<td>Plural words and apostrophes The <em>s</em> on the word ‘speakers’ shows it is a plural word (i.e. there is more than one speaker). Apostrophes are not used to form plurals. Confusion over apostrophes has a long history!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>in</em></td>
<td>Too many <em>ins</em>! This <em>in</em> isn’t necessary because one has already been provided: <em>in which language is used</em>. Writers sometimes use the <em>in which</em>… structure because it sounds more formal. However, in speech, people are more likely to say <em>which language is used in</em>. Basically, writers mix the two styles in error. Good proof reading should weed this type of problem out!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>, it</td>
<td>Comma where a full stop is needed. A full stop is needed here, since <em>it</em> really starts a new sentence. Again, odd patterns of dividing text into sentences are common in starter student work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>. Such</td>
<td>Full stop where a comma is needed! This shows another common error linked to division of text into sentences. <em>Such as</em>… <em>accent</em> can’t stand alone independently as a sentence. If you read it aloud on its own, it doesn’t sound ‘finished’. (This is because it doesn’t have a verb in it.) Writers who produce this error tend also to produce the one above!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>i.e.</em></td>
<td><em>i.e.</em> where <em>e.g.</em> is needed (see Line 1 error comments)! The writer has again chosen the wrong one for the job. Liverpool and Scottish accents are only two examples from a long list of possibles. However, to use <em>i.e.</em> here implies these are the only two possibilities!</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td><strong>grammer</strong></td>
<td>Oh dear. If only the writer had used the spellchecker on the computer! There’s not really an excuse for this. This sort of error looks particularly bad when students are studying language-related topics!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>, this</td>
<td>Sentence division again: a full stop is needed rather than a comma (see above discussion of Line 4).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><strong>individuals</strong></td>
<td>Apostrophe needed! Here, the text is discussing something ‘belonging’ to, or characteristic of, an individual. The use of <em>s</em> here signals this ‘belonging’ (and not a plural, as on Line 2), but it needs an apostrophe with it to do so!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><strong>effect</strong></td>
<td><em>effect for affect</em> These are very often confused in starter student work. <em>Affect</em> is needed here, because a ‘process’ is being discussed (<em>affect</em> is a verb). <em>Effect</em> describes an ‘end product’, not a process (it’s a noun).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10, 14, 15, 16</td>
<td><strong>woman</strong></td>
<td><em>woman and women</em> This is a linguistically interesting error, but an error nonetheless, and a surprisingly common one! The writer has used the form of the word that is appropriate when discussing <strong>one</strong> woman, when the context suggests that the plural form, <em>women</em>, should be selected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td><strong>For example...</strong></td>
<td><em>For... UK</em> is not a full sentence; it can’t stand alone independently without sounding ‘unfinished’.</td>
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| 16   | Although| *Although* mixed up with *However*  

Although is a very popular mix-up amongst undergraduates! The word *Although* signals that what follows is going to be a clause that is dependent on another one in some way. If you read the sentence on Line 16 out loud, you should feel that there is something ‘missing’ at the end of the sentence, despite the fact that it is a long one.  

*However* does not carry this baggage. It introduces independent clauses. *However* is what is needed here for the sentence to make proper sense. |
| 17   | argueably| Erk! Click on the spellchecker! |
| 19   | it’s     | This is the exception to the apostrophe rule (see Line 9)!  

When *its* means ‘belonging to it’, it doesn’t take an apostrophe! |
| 19   | Its      | More apostrophes!  

Here, because the form represents the merger of two words: *it* and the contracted form of *is*, an apostrophe is needed to show this merger or contraction of a word.  

However, there is another issue here. Some tutors (and most academic publishers) feel that contracted forms like *can’t*, *won’t*, *shan’t*, *wouldn’t*, *they’ll*, etc. are too informal and speech-like for academic writing. It therefore could be better to avoid them in written work. |
| 19   | less     | *less or fewer?*  

Traditionalists would say that *fewer* is more appropriate in this context, and this would be the *preferred* form in academic writing.  

Note, however, that the use of *less* on Line 20 is acceptable. If you’re confused, follow our links to resources and websites discussing such issues: [Academic writing for your level of skills](#) |
Yes, some students do get these confused! Perhaps such errors are sometimes subconscious confusions, made when typing quickly. However, they show the need for careful proof reading.

As a ‘proper noun’, this should have a capital letter.

This is another word (like although) that starts a dependent clause. Try reading it aloud and see if you agree that it somehow sounds like it has to have another sentence to go with it.

the whole text is one giant paragraph! This doesn’t help the reader to process the argument as effectively as they would if more clues to the argument’s progression were provided. This could be done though the grouping together of closely-related points into separate paragraphs.

there are no references to support some of the information given. This isn’t a writing accuracy issue, and so discussion of it belongs in another section (link to references). However, if you felt the need for something to identify the mysterious Research in the 1960s… (Line 9), and wanted to know who sometimes claimed that fewer social divisions exist in society, your instincts were right!

A ‘Rough Guide’ to your error-spotting skills:

Select the description that best describes your performance.

‘Clever Clogs’: you spotted all or nearly all the problems…

Well done! This suggests you could avoid some of the most common spelling, punctuation and organisational problems shown in students’ work (note where the apostrophe came at the end of students’) when they start university.

BUT
Don’t get complacent! There are lots of other nasties out there that even competent writers fall foul of! Also, it’s often easier to spot errors in other people’s work than in your own, especially if you don’t routinely proof read your work!

Everyone benefits from conscious reflection and work on their written style whilst at university. Start by considering any errors you didn’t spot and following links on this site to find out more about them.

▶ ‘Shows promise but could do better’: you spotted about half of the glitches...

That’s a good start. You may well feel you have competent writing skills and these skills could have served you well up to now.

However, academic writing at university level has its own requirements, and it is well worth investing some time to clarify things you aren’t sure of or need more practice in. You will see the results in your grades!

It would be worth your while to start thinking about the things you didn’t spot and following the links on this site to find out more about them, and the general resources available on academic writing.

▶ ‘Tried hard and further work will pay off!’: you spotted relatively few problems...

Don’t panic! Lots of students starting university need to strengthen their writing skills. The process of studying at university level - attending lectures and seminars and, most importantly, reading academic material in books and journals - will start to have an almost unconscious but positive effect on your writing.

However, it’s a good idea to start as you mean to go on, and familiarise yourself with some sources of information on academic writing. You can then have these to hand when your first pieces of work come along.

Also, remember that tutors don’t expect you to get things right from the word go! Studying at university level is, after all, about development. You will find that tutors will help you identify problems and direct you to further support if necessary.

Follow the links on this site to find out more about features of accurate writing, along with general resources available on it.
Now you’ve read how the writer went wrong, have a go at the following:

▶ **Print out** a copy of Version 1 of the text.
▶ **Decide where you would want to break the ‘mega-paragraph’ down** into a series of smaller ones.
▶ **Make the other necessary corrections** to the text in a different coloured pen. You may need to do some re-wording in places.
▶ **Check your efforts** against the suggested ‘**Corrected**’ version, below.

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One final question

When reading through the Corrected Version, did

- the content seem clearer and more authoritative?
- it seem easier to read?

It’s likely that both of these happened.

This is the difference that using correct academic English makes.

It is used for a reason!

To ponder…

Do you know how to use *imply* and *infer* accurately?

Many students don’t.

See if you can find out from the further links on the ‘Writing Essays’ web page, and/or from a good dictionary that uses example sentences, what the difference is.