Grammar, Spelling & Punctuation
Quick Guide

1. Commonly misspelled words:

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<th>Commonly misspelled words</th>
<th>Correct Usage</th>
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| To, too and two           | *To* is used with the infinitive *(to watch, to run, etc.)* or with an indirect object *(I gave the book to the student)* or as a preposition *(The Manager ran to the Fire Exit)*.  
*Too* is an adverb – it adds information to a verb: ‘that athlete was *too slow* to win the race’. In addition, it can be used in the sense of *also*: ‘The teacher, *too*, was puzzled by this suggestion’.  
*Two* is a number – ‘two eggs’, ‘two books’, etc. |
| Their, there and they’re  | *Their* is a possessive form *(something belonging to ‘them’)*.  
*There* is an adverb, indicating location *(over there)*.  
*They’re* is a contraction of ‘they are’ |
| Your and You’re           | *Your* is possessive *(‘It’s yours’); *you’re* is short for ‘you are’.* |
| It’s and its              | *It’s* is a contraction of ‘it is’.  
*Its* is a possessive pronoun *(it belongs to it: its properties, etc.)* |
| Separate not separate     | *Occasional* not *occasional*  
*Incidentally* not *incidently* |
| Desperate not desperate   | *Definitely* not *definitely*  
*Dependence* not *dependance* |

2. **Sentences** are the basic unit of academic writing. Students often write *sentence fragments* in assignments and leave out the main verb. A main verb has *tense* *(past, present, future)* and an implied subject *(either an I, you, s/he, we, they* *form or a noun – the bus, the pencil, etc.)* Make sure your sentences always have a main verb.

3. A **paragraph** is a collection of two or more sentences developing a *single* topic, theme, or idea. Make sure all the sentences in a paragraph are thus related in some way and develop the main point you want to make in that paragraph.

4. **Syntax** is the technical term for the rules governing the way words in any language are put together into sentences. Be careful: a small change in word order can completely change the meaning of the sentence. Word order is absolutely crucial for clarity, accuracy and meaning.

5. Correct **Grammar** means using the right word for the job:

- **nouns** are labelling words for *people, animals, places and concepts* etc.  
They can be singular or plural, such as science/sciences. Nouns are often preceded by the *definite* *(the’)* or *indefinite* article *(‘a’ or ‘an’).* Missing out the article can subtly change the meaning of a sentence!

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• **pronouns** replace nouns. Common pronouns are: *I, me, you, he, him, her, they, them, mine, yours, his, hers and theirs*. But be careful with pronouns. It must be clear which noun is being replaced by the pronoun. Lack of clarity can lead to confusion.

• **adjectives** are describing words – it tells you more about a noun

• **adverbs** are often confused with adjectives. An adverb tells you more about the verb – e.g. *she ran quickly*, *they got on well*, *you write beautifully*.

• **verbs** are ‘action’ or ‘being’ words – to run, to write, to think, etc. They have **tense** (past, present, future) and a **subject** (*I, you, s/he, we, you, they*). They can be active – ‘the boy is bouncing the ball’, or passive – ‘the ball is bounced by the boy’.

• **prepositions** show the relationship between one word and another. Common prepositions are: *in, on, at, for, under, over, from, to, into, with, before, after, around, near, past, opposite and between*.

• **conjunctions** join sentences or clauses, and include *and, but, however*.

6. **Punctuation** must be used correctly:

• **Full stops** (.) are used to divide text and mark the end of a sentence

• **Commas** (,) divide up groups of words within a sentence. They are extremely important and help to keep units of writing together

• **Semi-colons** (;) indicate a more substantial break in the sentence flow

• **Colons** (:): are only used to introduce lists or to link two ideas, rather like a hinge (e.g. *The election result was clear: the government would change*.)

7. **Apostrophes** used incorrectly in students’ writing is a very common mistake, and very irritating! Apostrophes should be used:

• When letters have been left out of a word (e.g. *it won’t be necessary*)

• To show possession (e.g. *Einstein’s theory of relativity*). Usually, the rule is ‘**apostrophe s** for singular nouns, **s apostrophe** for plural’

Be particularly careful with:

• *it’s* (for *it is*) and *its* (possession: ‘its qualities’!)

• **plural** nouns: books, buildings, etc. Plurals do not need the apostrophe!

8. **Common mistakes** in academic writing include:

• Leaving sentences hanging in the air with words such as *to, with, or for*

• Poor use of capital letters: technically, you need capital letters at the start of every sentence, and for **proper nouns** (the Bible, the Act of Parliament)

• Use of colloquial English (normal everyday slang)

• *txt speak* – *U must spell it out and get it sr8t 4 yr tutor …*

• Long, rambling sentences – be clear, precise and direct

• Incorrect use of quotations: short quotations in inverted commas (“ ”) within the text, longer quotes in an indented paragraph.

• Incorrect use of **relative pronouns** (who, whom, which, that)

• Mismatch between subject and verb (she *sees*, but *I see*)

• Run-on sentences: The driver brought the train to a halt at the station, however the train was late so the guard immediately blew the whistle. This is made up of two sentences, and should have a full stop after ‘the station’.