# Some tips to reduce spelling and grammar mistakes in English and to improve the overall quality and style of your papers

**Ce qui se conçoit bien s'énonce clairement,
et les mots pour le dire arrivent aisément.**

French saying

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# Contents

Within the scientific realm, English has become the prima lingua. Most research projects, scientific papers and publications are written in English. However, we do not have to be native speakers to produce correct and well-written papers. Studying the language is a life-long and rewarding commitment that can only be achieved with patience, determination and self-discipline. By writing this document, we want to provide you with some useful tips that you can keep in mind while organizing your paper in English. By no means are we covering all the subtleties of English, but then again that is not our intention. We just hope this paper can bring some new ideas on the way you organize and (most importantly) revise your papers in English.

## Proof reading

Among all the tips we are going to include in this document, proofreading is by far the most important. After finishing any assignment or any piece of writing in English, give yourself some time to check it afterwards. Disengage the mind from what you were writing; distract yourself for at least 15 minutes before going back to the paper. These few minutes are crucial in the revision stage. If you check your paper immediately after you have finished writing it, you run the risk of reading what you think you wrote instead of reading what is actually in front of you. It has also been proved that re-reading the writing in a loud voice or making someone else read it to you may help spot mistakes that went unnoticed the first time.

## Software applications

No computer programme can beat our ability to produce accurate pieces of writing. However, these applications come in very handy especially with spelling mistakes and punctuation. It just takes one click, and the results are worth the try.

Tools: spelling and grammar checker (Word Microsoft Office, OpenOffice), Google Search, Microsoft Translator, Google Translate.

First, check the options for spelling and grammar: for Microsoft Office Word 2007, open Word Options - Proofing - When correcting spelling and grammar in Word - Settings - choose the desired options. Microsoft Office spelling and grammar checker (SGC) is also useful to check spelling (see Check spelling and grammar - Word - Microsoft Office). One problem is that many medical terms (e.g., vaginosis) are not included in the dictionary. You can check the word using Google Search or another search engine: e.g. vaginosis - Google Search = About 3,310,000 results, then you can add it to dictionary.

You can also consult many websites online that may cast some light on particular grammar structures or collocations that you find difficult to apply. A highly recommended website is: http://www.wordreference.com/

If English is not your first language, you can use a translation tool. You can start using the Microsoft Translator (see Translate text, Translate Document In Word 2010): the translation quality of medical documents is poor. Google Translate produces better results. In Google Translate you can also click for alternate translations and drag with shift key to reorder words or phrases.

Some examples on how to use these applications are given below:

Initial sentence: **Its necessary to invest in the adolescent because there are some public health, human rights and economic reason**.

After checking with SGC: <mark>It is</mark> necessary to invest in the adolescent because there are some public health, human rights and economic reason.

There is clearly something wrong, not detected by SGC: …there <mark>are</mark> some public health, human rights and economic <mark>reason</mark>.

Modified sentence: It is necessary to invest in the adolescent because there are some public health, human rights and economic reasons.

Now we can start checking phrases using [Google Search](). We can search the exact phrase enclosing the text in quotation marks or using [Google Advanced Search]() - Find web pages that have this exact wording or phrase.

First we will check ["to invest in the adolescent"]() = 2 results.

Try ["to invest in adolescents"]() = about 19,100 results.

Look who is using ["to invest in adolescents"]() e.g., "important reasons to invest in adolescents" in [WHO. Value adolescents invest in the future: educational package facilitator's manual. 2003.]()

Modified sentence: It is necessary <mark>to invest in adolescents</mark> because there are some public health, human rights and economic reasons.

Next phrase: ["because there are some public health"]() = No results found.

Try: ["because there are public health"]() = about 108,000 results.

Modified sentence: **It is necessary to invest in adolescents because there are public health, human rights and economic reasons**.

We will check "because there are public health, human rights and economic reasons" using wildcard (asterisk character *): see [Google\'s * Wildcard Operator - Google Guide]().

["Because there are public health * reasons"]() = no results found.

Try: ["for public health * reasons"]() = about 67,400,000 results.

Modified sentence: **It is necessary to invest in adolescents for public health, human rights and economic reasons.**

As an alternative: **For public health, human rights and economic reasons, it is necessary to invest in adolescents.**

## General grammar rules

### Subject

English is a language that necessarily needs a subject in each sentence and this is so because it is a language that almost shares the same structure for each tense and pronoun. An example is given below:

The employees **organized** the meeting.

The president **organized** the meeting.

You **organized** the meeting.

As we can see if it were not for the subject we would not know to whom we are referring in our sentences. This concept, which may appear quite evident in the example given, should be applied to any type of sentences, including impersonal sentences (That is when we are not so sure or we do not want others to know who the subject is). Examples:

It is necessary…

It should be pointed out…

It may be taken into consideration…

Even though the "it" in the previous sentences cannot be easily replaced for specific references, if we were not to include it, the sentence would be rendered meaningless. We cannot simply write:

Is necessary to buy cars… (Wrong)

One interesting tip that you can use so as not to forget the subject in your sentences is to dissect the sentence and rearrange the elements in a more convenient way. Like that you can ensure you are including both a subject and a predicate in your sentences:

**It is necessary to buy cars …**

The rearranged version would be:

**To buy cars (subject) is necessary…**

## Plural forms and pro-forms

One of the commonest mistakes among English learners occurs with the word "People". Bear in mind that "People" stands for many persons, and therefore, the verb that follows it should be conjugated in the plural: People ARE.

Since scientific papers are mainly technical and contain a lot of jargon, the use of very unspecific words such as "everyone, everything, everywhere, and anyone" should not be abused. These function words are called pro-form. They are usually used to substitute a word that has already been used somewhere in the text. For example, the use of pronouns is a type of pro-form. Example: The secretary has submitted some information. She (instead of using the secretary again) has also called the chief.

Pro-forms are essential in any text because they contribute to its cohesion. But we have to keep in mind that technical texts are to be very specific. And too many pronouns and substitute words can produce ambiguity.

## Style and punctuation

Read the assignment and make sure that you are organizing your text accordingly. Most of the answers are expected to follow an essay pattern. So you should try to include an introduction paragraph (where you introduce the topic of your writing and you explain how you are going to develop the subject). You then can devote 2 or 3 paragraphs to develop your ideas. It could be

initial findings, back up information or just arguments and counterarguments. Finally, you should end your text with a paragraph where you summarize the main points you have made in your writing without introducing any new information. The idea is to round off what you have been saying not to present a new topic.

The way you organize a text says a lot about what you are trying to convey. It is the first thing the reader is going to encounter so make it proper and appealing. The length of the paragraphs has to be more or less similar so as to produce a balance text. Cohesion is essential, monitor what you have been saying. Follow a line of thought. If you want to insert a different idea, consider starting a new sentence or a new paragraph. The best way to organize a text is to write an outline at the beginning. Here, we give you some ideas: devote some time for brainstorming and research. Then, just jot down some ideas that you may find interesting to include in your document. Only now begins the process of writing. And it is just like cooking. Once you have the ingredients, apply the recipe and unravel your imagination. It is true that scientific texts are formal but it does not mean that you cannot add your own touch of creativity.

As regards punctuation, the main purpose is to facilitate the reading of the text. Therefore, do not forget to include commas, semi colons and stops. Very long sentences put the readers off and cause confusion. So it is better to write "short and sweet" sentences, at least until you feel more at ease with the language.

## Final comments and tips

To sum up a bit what we have been saying we have prepared a short list with what we consider are the most important tips:

1. Proof reading. Think, write and REVISE.
2. Use the applications you have in your word processor or online to reduce misspellings.
3. Think about what you want to say. Take your time. Planning is worth it.
4. Organize your ideas in paragraphs.
5. Write short sentences.
6. Check that each sentence has a subject and a predicate. And make sure that the predicate coordinates with the subject. Plural subjects need to be conjugated in the plural.
7. Increase the cohesion of your text with connectors.
8. Use but do not abuse pro-forms.
9. Check punctuation.
10. Ask a colleague, friend or relative to read the text you have produced and make any amendment you may need.

Just hope this document may help you. Now it is time for you to put it into practice and remember: **keep it simple and monitor your speech**.

Good luck,

GFMER, Geneva Foundation for Medical and Education Research.