**Grammar: Pre-Class Activities**

**Introduction**

Grammar can be loosely described as the set of structural rules that govern the composition of writing. Although it evolves over time, a core set of rules needs to be followed if you are to write clearly and correctly. This guide is not meant to provide a comprehensive list of these rules, but instead focuses on some of the more important ones to learn as well as those that students often find difficult.

**Verb Tenses and Consistency**

Verb tenses help tell people **when** something happened (or will happen). For example: “I ***study*** biology,” refers to the present (I am currently studying biology), whereas: “I ***studied*** biology,” refers to the past (as it implies that I *no longer* study biology).

There are six basic tenses that we use on a frequent basis, and these are highlighted below, with examples. *Note: Consider how the implication of the sentences written for the Present Perfect and Simple Past differ based on the addition of one word (have).*

1. Simple Present: I study biology
2. Present Perfect: I have studied biology for 12 years
3. Simple Past: I studied biology for 12 years
4. Past Perfect: I had studied biology
5. Simple Future: I will study biology
6. Future Perfect: I will have studied biology

Although it would be good for you to know the differences between these six basic tenses, and to be able to write simple sentences in each one, the most important thing is to be able to recognise when the tense shifts in your writing; this is not always a bad thing, but it can lead to confusion for your reader(s) and roll in to additional grammar issues. For that reason, you are advised to use the same tense within each sentence (and often within a complete paragraph).

For example, writing: “***I have studied biology for 12 years, and I also study chemistry,”*** is confusing because a reader doesn’t know how long you have studied chemistry for (or whether this is important in the context of what you are writing). In that example, you would have mixed the present perfect tense with the simple present tense. Had you written everything in the present perfect tense (***I have studied biology for 12 years, and I have also studied chemistry for seven***) this potential confusion would have disappeared.

**Question 1 (5 marks)**

The five sentences below all feature potentially confusing shifts in tense. Try to rewrite them so as to make sure the tense does not shift. *Hint: There is more than one way to do this for each sentence, but try to keep the text as similar as possible.*

A: I was delighted with my grade on the grammar quiz because I study very hard.

B: I ask for further guidance about difficult rules as soon as the instructor finished her class.

C: Lots of people will make mistakes by the time they have mastered the concepts.

D: As educators, everyone hopes our writing skills quizzes would help students.

E: If we invested less time in creating them, we will have to lower our expectations of student writing progress.

**Distinguishing the Primary Tense**

It is usually helpful to distinguish which tense is the primary (main/chosen) one in a given piece of writing, and then only change this tense if and when you need to indicate a change in time frame.

When deciding, think how it would be most logical to convey the information you are going to write. For example, if you were writing the *Methods* section of a lab report or journal article, you should write everything in the simple past tense because it has already happened.

However, when you are telling a story, such as in a journalistic article, it might make sense to choose the simple present as the primary tense, but there will be points in the writing when you need to shift to the simple past tense to refer to something that has already happened, as in the example sentence below:

*Zoologists stress that plastic litter, rather than sharks, is the real killer in the marine environment. Plastic waste entangles and poisons hundreds of dolphins and porpoises every year whereas sharks kill far fewer individuals. These shocking figures emerged from a recent study that involved specialists from four universities.*

**Question 2 (5 marks)**

Read the paragraph below and decide which tense is the primary one for this piece of writing (1 mark). Then highlight the sentences in which the verbs and tenses do not agree (2 marks), before revising them to make sure they agree and follow the primary tense you initially selected (2 marks).

*The screen flickered as pixels began to etch out a 3-D shape at the same time as data fed in from my experiment. Alongside the crystallography equipment, my lab mates peered excitedly at the monitor. I could not hide my delirium as I picture the future awards and publicity. I waited a few more seconds, rising from my seat, as even grander thoughts passed in and out of my mind. We worked for six months before the method even showed signs of success. Yet this proved once and for all that we were always on the right track.*

**Subject/Verb Agreement**

There are many rules that govern how you should write the verb in a sentence, based on the subject of that sentence. The four below are the most common rules that you are likely to need to apply in your writing, and these are the rules that can be especially tough to master.

*Tip: Remember that in general the subject comes at the start of a sentence, and it is this – and its relationship with the main verb, that is important, as in:*

“Richard and I are excited to stop learning about grammar and go for lunch.”

1. **Do not be distracted by anything that comes in between the subject and the main verb, as in:**

* “My lab partner, with his many friends, takes up [**NOT ‘take up’**] a whole workbench.”
* “The many students, with my lab partner, take up **[NOT ‘takes up’]** a whole workbench.”

1. **Collective nouns that imply more than one person/thing are still treated as singular subjects, as in:**

* “The group discusses science topics [**NOT ‘discuss’**] during meetings.”
* “The Zoology Zebras Soccer Club practices [**NOT ‘practice’**] on Tuesdays and Saturdays.”

1. **When your writing includes a compound subject joined by *‘or’* or *‘nor’*, the verb should agree with the part of that subject that is closest to the verb, as in:**

* “Neither Suzy nor her friends, Claire and Ash, want [**NOT ‘wants’**] to take the new class.”
* “Maeve or Gavin is [**NOT ‘are’**] going to write up the lab report.”

1. **Words such as *each, either, everyone, anybody, and somebody* are all singular and therefore require a singular verb, as in:**

* “Each of the eighteen solutions we made is [**NOT ‘are’**] suitable for this method.”
* “Everybody thinks [**NOT ‘think’**] they are on top of their revision until the hour before an exam.”

**Question 3 (5 marks)**

Read the paragraph below before re-writing the elements that include **five** subject/verb agreement errors.

*Plants absorb nicotine from second-hand smoke, according to research conducted by a team of scientists in Germany. The team, which typically investigate the circumstances around chemicals appearing in food unexpectedly, were asked to find out why nicotine was found at high levels in several loose tea products. The team’s colleague, with his counterparts and their new software programs, want to explore how accurately nicotine take-up can be predicted. Mitchell thinks it will prove difficult to predict with any accuracy, but neither he nor his partners, Mei-Mei and Frank, wants to be proved right. Mei-Mei thinks nicotine take-up will differ greatly between plant species, but Frank thinks it will barely differ, seeing as gaseous exchange is basically the same in different plants. Either of these hypotheses are plausible. The scientists have so far only looked at peppermint plants, but have just taken in a shipment of other species for testing. The plants, with their unique preferred growing conditions, will require a lot of care before the cigarettes get anywhere near them!*

**Parallel Structure**

Much like consistency in verb tense, consistency in the form of linked parts in a piece of writing is important for clarity and readability. By this, we mean that the verb endings and related phrases and clauses within a sentence should all follow the same pattern.

For example: “Scientific understanding is improved by researchers explor**ing** new possibilitie**s** and communicat**ing** their finding**s,**” is written in parallel form and sounds smooth when you hear it.

On the other hand: “Scientific understanding is improved by researchers exploring new possibilities and when their findings are communicated,” is not written in parallel form, and is consequently harder to interpret. This should be corrected by changing the red portion to “…communicating their findings.”

The rule of using the same parallel structure in your writing should be applied whether you are writing complete sentences, or listing things.

For example, in this guide we are hoping to help you: use the definite and indefinite articles appropriately, write your tenses consistently, check that your subjects and verbs align correctly, and ensure that the parallel structure of your writing reads smoothly.

**Question 4 (5 marks)**

Read the paragraph below and make **five** changes where they are required to make sure the sentences are all written in parallel form. *Hint: Try to keep the stem of each sentence the same, and only change as little text as you need to. In some cases you will just need to delete words or re-arrange the text.*

*I have always enjoyed science classes, whether the science being discussed is biological, chemical, physics or astrological. I have always found the best instructors to be enthusiastic, attentive and they use new technology when lecturing. In the future, I hope to be creeping through the jungle, swimming in azure seas, and publish my ecosystem-saving research in the best journals. Hard work, determination and spending lots of time in the lab will be required if I am to reach my goal, though. The last experiment I performed didn’t find a solution but instead new questions were raised and whet my appetite for further research.*

**IMPORTANT: Before the In-Class Activities**

Look at an old assignment or essay and bring this with you to the in-class activities. You will use your old piece of work to look for grammar issues.