

# 9 English and expression

A note to readers. It is suggested that you increase magnification to 125% or 150% to read the guide on screen. Click on the magnifying glass icon at bottom left of the screen and select your magnification.

## Key points in Chapter 9

- **Good English and expression are required for high-grade work.**
- **Improvement will follow from awareness and attention to detail.**
- **A rich vocabulary enables effective communication.**
- **Work for the mastery of English and the refinement of style is a life-long task.**

The best time was two years ago in Hammersmith with a bunch of Midland prototypes looking for a drink down the high street. About fifteen of them. Short cunts with nobby haircuts and tasches. Stumpy little legs and beer guts. Looked like they should be on Emmerdale Farm shafting goats for a living. They clocked us coming the other way and took off. You could smell the shit over the petrol fumes, which is saying something in Hammersmith.

John King, *The Football Factory*. Jonathan Cape, 1996.

**T**Hese are the latter sentences of the first paragraph from a contemporary 'gritty' novel, and an indication of some of today's young person's street talk. Is it good English?

Jean Aitchinson, in her 1995 BBC Reith lectures, added vigour to the continuing debate on what is correct English and what is good English when she indicated that the rules for good English are not 'set in stone'. Language has a power, the power to communicate, when it is in tune with the needs and usage of people. That is why acceptable grammar, the meaning of words and styles of expression, have always changed, and continue to change. How does this affect you, a student?

It is necessary for you to accept that your course writing should not

be in anything like street talk, of which John King's novel is a strong example, but in the formal English of your academic discipline. You should not write or speak your answers in the colloquial language you speak to your friends, because that is not what is expected by those who assess your answers. However good you are as a student of History you are assessed by your written work and a refined, clear, robust English style can raise your assessment grades by up to 50 per cent. English and expression, therefore, matter a great deal. I agree that the English of scholarship, as English in general, changes and is not as it was 40 years ago but if you aim for high standards you will have an advantage. This chapter presents a few guidelines to help you.

### Basics of grammar (for most readers, just a reminder)

**Sentences.** Sentences contain a subject and a main verb. (Verbs are doing or being words.) A sentence is started with a capital letter and finished with a full stop. Example: Bismarck was Chancellor of Germany. Kennedy prepared a nuclear strike during the Cuban missile crisis.

A weakness of some students' answers is long, rambling sentences. If your sentences are too long, break them into shorter sentences but do not write only short sentences: try to have a mixture.

**Capital letters.** Capital letters are used to mark the beginning of each sentence and for the first letters of people, places, historical eras, institutions, ships and aircraft and trade names. Examples: Tony Blair; Trafalgar Square; Medieval York; House of Lords; Titanic; Lancaster bomber; Vauxhall Vectra. Note, that seasons and areas do not have a capital; for example, spring and southern England. As a general rule, use capital letters for a particular and a small letter for the general. Example: Britain won the Second World War but was unsuccessful in other wars.

**Punctuation.** The full stop. A full stop is used to mark the end of all sentences except direct questions (ended by ?) and exclamations (ended by !). History students will use these exceptions rarely. A full stop is also used with initials and after abbreviations (e.g. No. (number), a.m.). However, it is now common and acceptable to omit full stops with heavily used capital initials; for example: UN, BBC, IBM, MP.

**Comma.** Commas have no fixed rules for their use. They need to be used with care because their use can change the emphasis or meaning of a sentence. Commas are used to separate a clause within a sentence. A clause is part of the sentence but has a verb



in it. For example: Henry VIII, who married Ann Bolyne, insisted on the breach with Rome in 1533. Commas are often used in pairs, as is illustrated in the last example. The key to the good use of the comma is to imagine you have to speak the sentence you write. Put the commas where you pause in the sentence.

**Semi-colon and colon.** A semi-colon marks a longer pause, a more definite break in a sentence. A colon is used to introduce something. It may be a list or an elaboration of a point made previously or it may be a quotation.

**Apostrophe.** The apostrophe indicates the possession of a thing or a quality by someone or something. For example: The machine gun's advantage is the rate of fire. Cavour's squint eyes suggested a master manipulator's mind. (See, also, the note on contractions on the next page.)

**Use of its/it's.** It's means it is, but its denotes possession. Note: in this instance the apostrophe rule does not apply. Mistakes with the use of it's/its is widespread in students' work.

**The dash (–).** Avoid the use of the dash. It can be used instead of the more helpful full stop, colon or semi-colon.

### Comments on style

The three most frequent errors that weaken style are colloquialism, cliché and passive verbs.

**Colloquialism** is the kind of English you use when talking to your friends. For example, instead of 'Italy, with her beat-up old army, was smashed in North Africa', write 'Italy, her army poorly equipped and without fighting spirit, was soundly defeated in North Africa'.

**Clichés** are overused words or phrases. Their use lessens the sharpness and strength of your English. You can identify clichés by the frequency with which they are used. Examples include: The Wall Street Crash and depression put the cat among the pigeons for Labour plans in 1931. Germany's defeat at Stalingrad was the moment of truth for Hitler's resistance on the Eastern front.

**Passive verbs.** The use of passive verbs is the major reason for absence of robust English. Consider this sentence: Grey, returning to office, having seen the support of the people, set about passing the Great Reform Act. Passive verbs are identified by the 'ing' at the end. The sentence expressed with active verbs reads: Grey, who saw the support of the people, returned to office and passed the Great Reform Act.



**Dead words and expressions** make your English flabby. Dead words include very; totally; quite; extremely; completely; absolutely; really. These words can slip into your essays because we use them when we speak. Some of them, such as completely or totally, weaken what you write by exaggeration. Dead expressions include: It is worthy of note that ... It is not an exaggeration to say that ... It is interesting to note that ...

**Tautology** is the useless repetition of the same idea in different words. For example: Wilhelm II, troubled and anxious by the Balkan crisis in 1914 ...; The sudden shock of the two nuclear bombs made the Japanese leaders agree to peace.

**Avoidance of general adjectives and adverbs.** Words such as good, bad, badly, brilliant, dreadful or terrible can be replaced, usually, by more specific words. Example, 'Winston Churchill's party, after doing dreadfully in the 1945 election, became the Opposition.' It would be more effectively expressed as 'Winston Churchill's party lost over half their 387 seats in 1945 and became the Opposition.'

**Particular words to use with care or to avoid.** These include: just; simply; also; and, especially, get or got. The last two should be replaced by a more specific verb: 'The German army got bogged down at the Marne' should be replaced by 'The German army's advance was halted at the Marne'.

**Confusion in the use of effect and affect.** Affect means influence. For example, wealthy landowners were affected by the People's Budget in 1909. Effect, which can be used as a verb or a noun, means the reason for some event. For example, Prussia's use of railways effected a rapid victory in 1870. Used as a noun you would write: The effect of the railways was a rapid Prussian victory.

**Tone.** When you write for your Tutors or Examiners use a tone which is neither deferential nor subservient, as though you cannot know much about the subject; nor patronising, as though the reader does not know as much as you.

**Contractions.** Do not use contractions (such as, don't, weren't) in essays. Contractions are inappropriate in formal English.

**The personal pronoun, I or my.** The personal pronoun should not be used in academic answers. If you wish to give particular emphasis that the idea or argument is yours, use the expression 'This writer's view is ...'

## The importance of words

Whereas some academic disciplines, for example Maths, Foreign Languages or Philosophy, require particular aptitudes the foundation requirements for History are an ability to read and write. From this basis the History skills are developed and one of these is language skills. To make a point very strongly, I sometimes tell students that the only equipment needed to make progress in History study are the children's game *Mastermind*, which requires logical thought, and a dictionary. An advanced History course begins the preparation of students to be among the thinkers in any branch of life and a thinker has to be able to deal with complicated ideas, enabled by higher-order language skills. Only with a rich vocabulary is it possible to think with the precision needed for complicated ideas and then to communicate them. In an essay answer *every* word matters, and the use of exactly the right word enhances the quality of your work.

Progress with expression is achieved by awareness of the importance of words and the creation of a rich vocabulary. You may be good at this anyway and widen your vocabulary without difficulty, but if you are not you will benefit from more formal methods. One way is to have a little notebook and jot down words whose meanings you do not know as you read. Then, every week or so, look up the meanings of the new entries in a dictionary and write them in. Words new to you are best remembered by use, but there are not always occasions to do so and the vocabulary notebook method enables you to skim over entries, now and again, and refresh your memory. In this way you will have more words at your fingertips and you will have taken steps toward being a powerful thinker and communicator.

**Spelling.** Persistently mis-spelt words weaken a reader's confidence in the writer. Take the trouble to note the correct spelling and add the words with which you have difficulty to the back of your vocabulary book. Words (correctly spelt) which tend to be mis-spelt include: definite, separate, independence, existence, dependant (noun), representative, publicly, benefited, aggressive.

**A note on hypocrisy.** A hypocrite is a person who does not do what he/she says should be done. Alert readers will conclude that I, the writer of the guide, have not put into practice what I advise. My answer has two parts. First, I purposely did not follow all the advice and introduced a colloquial tone so that the book will seem more approachable to its readers. Second, this is merely a student guide to effective study and not a scholarly student essay.