

WRITING GOOD ENGLISH:

Introduction

It is essential when writing essays, examination papers or any form of assignment to write good English. If you do not express yourself accurately and correctly, then you will almost certainly be marked down. This unit is designed to provide you with some basic rules and tips about writing good English, which you may have missed at school or forgotten. Even though you might consider some of the information simple, the content is based on common errors that undergraduate students make or lack of understanding they often have.

This is a unit you may wish to return to regularly for help when you are writing an assignment. If you continue to have particular difficulties, then seek further help and advice, for example from your tutor, course director or student services - UWIC does provide a support service for those who have specific problems.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit you should be better able to:

- spell most common words accurately or know how and where to seek assistance
- use punctuation correctly
- use an appropriate register and style and be able to express yourself clearly
- use appropriate discourse markers
- construct accurate and logical sentences and paragraphs
- avoid common errors of English.

Spelling

It is difficult to 'teach' spelling in the English language as such, because there are very few rules, and most of these are regularly broken anyway. Spelling is very visual - good spellers can normally 'see' whether a word **looks** right or wrong, unless they are faced with a new word, whereas other people have difficulty. Another problem with English is that it is not always phonetic: the way it sounds is not always the way it is spelt.

If you think a word is wrong or you simply do not know how to spell it, then clearly the first step is to **look it up**. Obviously for this you need to use a dictionary or some other book of words. Do take time to check words if you are not sure - it is worthwhile because you will be learning the spelling, as well as earning better marks! If you are using a word processor, then life is likely to

be simpler, because almost certainly it will have a spell checker built in to the program, which will indicate on the screen when a word is incorrect and direct you to the correct spelling.

Beware,

- the spell checker could be American and could give you incorrect information, showing correct spellings to be wrong or vice versa (see section below on Americanisms).
- a word may be spelt correctly but have a different meaning e.g. wait (verb - to stop moving) and weight (noun - a force acting downwards due to gravity).

It is still useful to have an English (British) dictionary available to check if you are unsure.

A good aid to learning correct spelling is to **look up** a word in a dictionary, **cover** it up, try to **write** it from memory and then **check** your spelling again. This enables you to picture the word in your mind, which helps you to remember it. In other words don't just copy the word, try to write it for yourself and then see if you got it right - you probably will have! Try this next time you look up a word.

Some common rules to help you spell correctly are as follows:

'i' before 'e' except after 'c'.

For example, receive, hygiene, conceit, ceiling, but note exceptions, such as weigh, seize, height.

If a verb ends in a vowel then a consonant and you need to add -ing, -ed, -er or something similar to that word, then you double the last letter.

For example, traveller, plannning, trapped, but note exceptions, such as benefeited, focused, buttered.

If a verb ends in 'e' and you need to add -ing, -ed, -er or something similar to that word, then drop the 'e'.

For example, manageing, useing, exceiting, but note exceptions, such as dyeing, ageing.

If a word ends in a consonant and then 'y' and you need to add to it, then the 'y' changes to 'i' and in the plural to 'ies'.

For example, accompanyment, lorryes, happyness, candyes, skyes.

Note that words that end in a vowel and then 'y' do not change, for example, donkeys, payments, Sundays.

When made plural, words ending in an 'f' become 'ves', and words ending in a double consonant, an 'x' or an 'i', 'o' or 'u' after a consonant add 'es'.

For example, knives, lives, pushes, masses, sexes, potatoes, but note exceptions, such as roofs.

In British English an 's' is used for a verb and a 'c' for a noun in words that sound the same.

For example, practise (verb), practice (noun), advise (verb), advice (noun), license (verb), licence (noun). Note that these are not the way the Americans spell them.

As you can see from the above it is very difficult to try and make hard and fast rules as some of them become over complicated. Perhaps a better strategy is to try to avoid common errors by learning the exceptions or simply memorising the words you continually spell wrong. Here are the correct spelling of some words that students often get wrong:

- **accommodate/accommodation** (two 'c's and two 'm's)
- **harass** (one 'r' but two 's's)
- **embarrass** (two 'r's and two 's's)
- **maintenance**
- **supersede**
- **precede**
- **proceed**
- **principal** (meaning the main or most important thing or the head of something)
- **principe** (meaning a tenet or truth)
- **adviser**
- **stationery** (paper, pens etc.)
- **stationary** (stopped)
- **repetitive**
- **complimentary** (meaning to give a compliment or say something nice)
- **complementary** (meaning next to or to run alongside)
- **attendance**
- **misspell**
- **disappear** one 's', but two 'p's
- **affect** (verb meaning to affect something or noun meaning related to the senses)
- **effect** (noun meaning the effect of something or verb meaning to put in place)
- **unnecessary** (two 'n's, one 'c' and two 's's)

Clearly this list could be endless (you may want to add to or subtract from it).

Finally a word about Americanisms: As noted earlier, spell checks may be American and words such as practice and practice, licence and license are used differently in American English. You need to be aware of the differences between the two versions, as you are very likely to read books and articles written in both, especially now if you use the Internet. A common difference

is that British English tends to use 's' instead of 'z', for example, in 'organise', 'realise', 'prioritise' - your spell check may put a red line under the word if you use 's'. Don't worry - the main point is to be consistent; if you use 'z', then stick to it right through, as it is acceptable; just avoid interchanging the two. Americans like to make verbs out of nouns by putting -ize on! Some of these words are acceptable now, but don't over do it!

Note that the rest of the English speaking world generally uses British spellings (e.g. in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Europe and the British Commonwealth), but the American influence is spreading and 'computer-speak' is becoming internationalised; for example, we now use the American version '**program**' (rather than programme) as standard when talking about computers. Note also that Americans use different words to us at times, which may not be understood by a British audience, for example 'truck' for 'lorry', 'hood' for 'bonnet' (of a car), 'sidewalk' for 'pavement' etc. You are probably familiar with many of these. Just be careful if you are going to use any American terminology in your assignments - ensure that they are known and understood generally.