

OWLS Writing Guides: ESL TROUBLESPOTS



Nouns:

- Don't confuse plural and possessive forms: *babies*= plural; *babies'* and *baby's* = possessive.
- Use the correct form for irregular plural nouns: *man/men, woman/women, foot/feet*.
- Noncount nouns (*advice, knowledge, salt*) have no plural form, so don't end them with *-s* or *-es*.

Pronouns:

- Don't confuse subject and object pronouns: *he/him, she/her, they/them*.
- Don't confuse masculine and feminine pronouns: *he/she, him/her*.
- Don't use *it* or *which* to refer to people.
- Don't leave out a pronoun used as the subject of the sentence: *It is crowded*, not *Is crowded*.
- Don't use a pronoun to repeat the subject of the sentence: *The teacher ~~she~~ is strict*.

Articles

- Use *the* (definite article) for a specific person, place, or thing.
- Use *a* or *an* (indefinite article) for a person, place, or thing whose specific identity is unknown.
- Don't use any article with noncount nouns (*alcohol, courage, butter, clothing*) or plural count nouns when they signify general categories: *She loves cats*.

Verbs

- Use the correct forms for irregular verbs: *give/gives, gave, given, giving*
- Don't omit linking verbs and helping verbs: *She is able to speak*, not *She able to speak*.
- When a verb takes another verb form as its object (*He likes running*), you need to decide between the gerund (the *-ing* verb form) and the infinitive (the *to* verb form). Some verbs can be followed by either, depending on the meaning intended: *I love to sing, I love singing*. But generally, an infinitive should follow a verb that states an intention, desire, or expectation: *She **wants to work** as a travel agent after graduation*. A gerund should follow a verb that states a fact or event: *He **started working** at noon*.

Adjectives and adverbs

- Use the proper form for nouns, adjectives, and adverbs that share the same root word: *beauty/beautiful/beautifully; excitement/exciting/excitedly; care/careful/carefully*.
- Don't confuse the *-ed* and the *-ing* forms of adjectives: *bored/boring; interested/interesting, excited/exciting*. The *-ed* form usually describes a person's reaction (*Jo is excited*); the *-ing* form usually describes the thing reacted to (*The game is exciting*).
- Use the correct form for comparative and superlative adjectives: *tall/taller/tallest; careful/more careful/most careful*.

Prepositions (at/in/on)

- To show time:
 - *At* expresses a specific time (*at 6 p.m., at lunchtime*).
 - *In* expresses a general time or a period of time (*in the afternoon, in 1960, in two hours*).
 - *On* expresses a specific day or date (*on Monday, on June 5*).
- To show place:
 - *At* expresses a specific place (*at home, at my desk*) or a specific target (*I shot at the target*).
 - *In* expresses an enclosed space (*in the bedroom*), a geographic location (*in Florida*), or a print medium (*in a book*).
 - *On* expresses a surface (*on the floor, on the street*) or an electronic medium (*on television*).
- Exceptions and idiomatic uses that don't follow the rules should be memorized: *in a car*, but *on a train*; *in the morning*, but *at night*.

Word order –basic sentence:

- The most common sentence pattern is subject-verb-object (S-V-O). Revise for awkward, unclear word order.
- Adjectives come before the nouns they modify: *I have a very messy room*, not *I have a room very messy*.
- Don't separate the verb from its object: *Sam ate seven eggrolls for dinner*, not *Sam ate for dinner seven eggrolls*.