

Improving your writing skills – Language

When writing a comment, apart from using correct grammar you should make your piece of writing more elaborate by paying attention to the following aspects:

1. using precise vocabulary and idiomatic language
2. using participle or gerund constructions
3. emphasizing important parts using inversion
4. using sentence connectives to link content logically
5. using disjuncts to comment on a statement

1. Using precise vocabulary and idiomatic language

- Try to avoid vague or general expressions such as “thing”, “say”, “go”, “do” etc., as they leave too much room for (wrong) interpretation.
- NEVER use “and so on”, “and things like that” or similar expressions!
- Use adjectives and adverbs to give more detailed information.
- Use idioms every now and then – it shows that you have a good command of the language.

2. Using participle or gerund constructions

A) Participle constructions are a good alternative to relative clauses (“... which is standing...”) or adverbial clauses (“When he heard...”), as they sound more formal.

Rules:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| a) If the verb is in the active | => <u>present participle</u> (-ing form) |
| b) If the verb is in the passive | => <u>past participle</u> (3 rd form of the verb) |

Example	Function
a) The man calling a taxi seems to be in a hurry. b) The drugs found in his bag were confiscated.	Participle construct. to shorten a relative clause: a) “who <u>is calling</u> a taxi” = active b) “which <u>were found</u> in his bag” = passive
Seeing almost nothing in the thick fog, Harry drove more carefully. I read the whole book while waiting for the bus. The plane crashed, killing all passengers in it.	Participle constructions to substitute adverbial clauses. They can be introduced by a conjunction (while, as if, when, ...).

B) Gerund construction

a) can be used to substitute subordinate clauses

Example	Function
On seeing her, he almost fainted. After getting off the bus, I hurried for the Underground.	Used after “on, before, after, for, in spite of”, the gerund constructions substitutes a subordinate clause. (“On seeing her” = “When he saw her”)

b) can occur after prepositions

Example	Function
Instead of cleaning up his mess, Steve just shrugged his shoulders and went away.	Used after “on, before, after, for, in spite of, it’s no use”, the gerund constructions substitutes a subordinate clause. (“On seeing her” = “When he saw her”)

c) can have a subject of its own

Example	Function
I don’t like Harry using my toothbrush. Can I say anything without you disagreeing?	Nouns or pronouns can act as a subject before the – ing form.

3. Emphasizing content

There are different ways to emphasize parts in your sentences. Use them to emphasize your statements when you are expressing your opinions, disagreeing, making strong suggestions, expressing annoyance, etc.

a) Passive voice

The passive voice is used when focusing on the object affected by an action. Using the passive emphasizes what is happening rather than who is doing something.

e.g. "The assignments are expected to be handed in on Monday."

b) Inversion

Generally more attention is given to the beginning of a sentence. You can change the word order by placing the element to be stressed at the beginning of the sentence followed by the inverted word order (auxiliary verb before the subject, followed by the main verb).

e.g. "Little did I know about his plan."
"Seldom have I laughed that much."
"Never before had Harry seen this sum of money."

c) Cleft sentences

Cleft sentences also use the initial position of a sentence to emphasize content. There are two types:

1) using "It" => followed by a relative clause

"It was Harry who stole your money, not me!"

"It is the noise of the railway that annoys me."

2) using "What" => is subject of the first sentence, second sentence starts with "be"

"What I need now is an hour of sleep."

"What Sally says is not that important to me."

d) Emphatic "do"

If used in positive statement, "do" or "did" emphasize the content. It is often used to contradict or disagree.

e.g. "I did do my homework, Sir, but my dog ate it!"
"I do hope you have a good excuse!"

4. Using connectives (=> see handout)

5. Using disjuncts

Disjuncts express an attitude to what is being described in the sentence. Examples:

e.g. "Frankly, I don't like him much." (Ehrlich gesagt, ...)
"Sadly, she had already left." (Sie war leider schon gegangen.)
"He had obviously talked to her before." (Offensichtlich hatte er...)

Others:

actually, after all, apparently, basically, fortunately, in fact, in my opinion, naturally, unfortunately, of course, perhaps, possibly, probably, ...