

10 Most Common ESL Mistakes

1. Misuse of articles

One of the most common ESL mistakes made in academic writing is the tendency to confuse indefinite and definite [articles](#). Indefinite articles (“a” or “an”) are used to refer to a noun, the specific identity of which is unknown. “A” is used for words that begin with a consonant sound and “an” is used for words that begin with a vowel sound. There is only one definite article in the English language (“the”); this means you don’t have to worry about listening for vowel sounds. “The” is used in front of singular or plural nouns and adjectives to refer to something with which both the writer and reader are familiar. “A duck” refers to a single unspecified duck whereas “the duck” refers to a specific duck.

2. Transitional phrases

Another one of the most common ESL mistakes we see in academic writing is an over-reliance on transitional phrases. Often, two logically-related sentences do not need a transitional word to link them. For example, “The lumberjacks chopped the tree. Consequently, it fell down.” In this instance, “consequently” is not needed because readers can figure out for themselves that the tree fell as a consequence of the lumberjacks’ chopping.

3. Watch your adjectives

Adjectives are used to describe nouns and can sometimes be tricky if you are using more than one to refer to a specific noun. If you are using more than one [adjective](#), they usually follow a specific order: 1) article, 2) judgment, 3) size, 4) shape, 5) age, 6) color, 7) nationality, and 8) material. Consider the sentence, “He wants a white new bike.” Does it sound weird? That’s because the color of the bike comes before the age of the bike. Reverse those two words and the sentence sounds correct.

4. Wordiness

The tendency to use two or three words when one would do is a common ESL mistake. If we compare the sentence, “Suzie believed, but could not confirm, that Bill had feelings of affection for her,” to this sentence, “Suzie assumed Bill liked her,” we notice that they communicate the same meaning, except one uses five words and one uses 14. When writing an essay, it’s important to avoid [wordiness](#) and to be as precise as you can when constructing sentences.

5. Plural possessives

This is not just a common ESL mistake, but one seen in writing from native English speakers as well. When showing possession of a plural noun, you simply add an apostrophe at the end of the

word (the brothers' bike). If the noun is singular, add an apostrophe plus the letter "s" at the end of the word (the cat's toy).

6. Adverbs

Another one of the most common ESL mistakes relates to [adverbs](#) (words that add something to a verb, such as ran quickly, drove slowly, or slept peacefully). In ESL academic writing, adverbs are sometimes placed far away from the verbs they modify. When using an adverb, keep it close to the verb in order to avoid confusion. Never put an adverb in between the word "to" and a verb (i.e., to quickly run). This results in what is known as a split infinitive and should be avoided in traditional academic writing.

7. Using a thesaurus

"I was crusading home from work and suddenly my fatigue blew out!" Translation: "I was driving home from work and suddenly my tire blew out!" A thesaurus is a great tool, but it can become a problem when homonyms (words that sound and are spelled the same, but have different meanings) are not understood. This is one of the most common ESL mistakes. Make sure you have a firm understanding of the definition of a word before you try to find an alternative.

8. Coordinating Conjunctions

When we see a sentence with a lot of coordinating [conjunctions](#) (and, but, if, or), we almost always make that sentence into two, three, or four separate sentences. When you write a sentence that contains a number of these words, it's best to review it and see where you can chop it up. Also, sentences that begin with a coordinating conjunction are often weak sentences that are made stronger simply by removing the conjunction. Our advice is to use these little words sparingly to avoid making this common ESL mistake.

9. Which/that

Misusing the terms [Which and That](#) is a common ESL mistake. "That" is used when the information being added is essential to the understanding of the sentence. "Which" is used when the information being added is not essential to the understanding of the sentence. If you use a "which" statement, be sure to offset it with commas.

10. Don't Be Afraid To Make Definitive Statements

We frequently note the absence of definitive statements in ESL writing. You may think that being non-committal is a way of maintaining objectivity, or you just may not be confident enough in your English writing. However, you should not be afraid of making definitive statements. When definitive statements are made, sentences are typically shorter and the writing becomes clearer and more concise.