Notes on grammar
Information for teaching writing
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Grammar

Grammar describes how the inflection (varied form) of words and the order of words contribute to meaning. In the model below, initial decisions about grammar are made at the **cultural and situational levels**. For instance, opinions are usually written in present tense whereas letters to the editor usually require formal expression. The following pages highlight grammatical decisions made at the levels of words and sentences.
Level of words and word groups

Words sit at the ‘bottom’ of this model of writing. There are two classes of words. **Open word classes** describe objects and concepts. **Closed word classes**, sometimes called grammatical word classes, provide structure in the language.

Open word classes — objects and concepts

**Nouns**

Nouns are used to name or label objects, people, places, concepts and feelings. A noun answers the questions ‘What?’ or ‘Who?’

There are **common** nouns — *cat, wombat, thought* — and **proper** nouns — *Sally, Brisbane, Queensland, Friday*. Proper nouns are capitalised.

Like other forms of vocabulary, nouns can denote the literal meaning of a word and also provide connotations of emotions and feelings associated with it — *leave/abandon; thrifty/stingy*. Understanding this distinction is important to the development of students’ writing.

**Nominalisation** is the formation of nouns from other words or phrases. *The saving of water is urgent.* Like any noun, this nominalised phrase can be introduced by the article ‘the’. In writing, nominalisation is a technique for expressing more abstract ideas and arguments. It can cloak the writer’s voice to represent opinion as fact.

**Noun groups**

Writers pack noun groups to increase the amount or precision of detail. The ability to construct such groups deliberately and consciously is a measure of a student’s growing control of writing.

A noun group can be a single noun or pronoun or can be expanded to include adjectives or adjectival phrases before or after the noun.

- *front door knob*
- *a long wailing note from Brian’s violin.*

**Verbs**

Verbs provide the dynamism in sentences or clauses by giving a sense of something happening. They show processes such as:

- action or doing — *hop, drive, promote, design*
- thinking and feeling — *plot, know, believe*
- saying — *say, cry, yell, roar, thunder*
- being and having — *is, was, are, has, have*

Verbs are changed in form to signal how or when they work. This is called **inflection** because it is usually accompanied by a raised tone in spoken language.

**Number**

The verb must ‘agree’ with the subject of the clause, meaning that, for example, a plural subject must have a plural verb — *The boys are brave. (Not boy are or boys is.)*

*The band of wolves is waiting for the caribou. (Not band of wolves are ...)*
Tense and modality

Verbs can be inflected to show when something occurred (present, future, or past).

She likes (liked, will like) walking her dog.

Because ‘walking’ is a non-finite verb, it does not have a time inflection.

In the example above, the future tense must be formed by adding another verb, ‘will’, as an auxiliary to the main verb, ‘like’. There are auxiliaries of being — do, have, be — and the modal auxiliaries — can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, ought, will, would.

By attaching one of the modal auxiliaries to a verb, a writer can give information about the degree of certainty, probability or obligation that attaches to a stated act.

Dinosaurs may have lived here. I have to care for my sister.

The construction of tense and modality can be quite complex. For example,

He had been going to be taking part in the attack on the fort. She would have liked to have gone with them.

In these two examples, the verb construction is present, in future, in past. Control over these structures is critical in narrative writing, particularly in using literary devices such as flashbacks. Expository writing may also require complex tenses, such as: We were supposed to have had a new park a year ago.

Verb groups

Verb groups can also be formed by adding to the main verb the auxiliary verbs mentioned above as well as:

- prepositions — He woke up.
- adverbs — He was fighting off the flu.
- negatives — Mary would not go home.

Elaborated phrases that function as a single verb help to make writing precise but with shades of additional meaning. Noun groups also achieve this function.

Active and passive voice

Verb forms determine whether a sentence is written in the active or passive voice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>voice</th>
<th>sentence order</th>
<th>example</th>
<th>effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>active</td>
<td>subject + verb + object</td>
<td>People make history</td>
<td>focus on the agent of an activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>passive</td>
<td>object + auxiliary (being verb) + verb + preposition (by) + subject</td>
<td>History is made by people</td>
<td>focus on the thing affected</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adjectives  Adjectives provide information about a noun. They are usually used within a noun group — *exciting, new book* — but can be used after a verb — *She is pretty.*

Adjectives can:

- describe — *beautiful child*
- show number or quantify — *two elephants*
- specify or point — *this newspaper*
- indicate possession — *Mary’s hat*
- compare — *biggest diamond*
- classify — *chemical formulae.*

Adverbs  Adverbs provide additional information about what is happening in the text. For example, they provide information about an action’s:

- manner of performance (how) — *ran speedily*
- time of occurrence — *came eventually*
- place of occurrence — *born locally.*

They can give emphasis or intensify, provide indications of attitude and extent or limit the action.

*She sang happily. She sang very happily. The tenor sang briefly.*

Closed word classes

These are a restricted group of words that act as structural markers in the text. They show the logical relations between the ideas and also indicate the weighting of ideas.

Articles  The definite article *the* indicates which particular thing is being referred to — *The dog next door.*

The indefinite article *a* (or *an*) indicates general nonspecific membership of a class — *A pig raided the cabbage patch.*

Conjunctions  Conjunctions show the relation between ideas in two parts of a sentence: one part of a sentence is coordinate with the other or else one part is subordinate to the other.

The *coordinating conjunctions* (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*) show relationships between two ideas of equal importance. *I want to go but I can’t.*

*Subordinating conjunctions* introduce and signal the function of a *subordinate clause* (just as *prepositions* do of phrases).

These include relations of:

- place — *where the road bends*
- manner — *as we did before*
- subsequent action — *since, after*
- earlier action — *before, once, until*
- concurrent action — *whenever, as, while*
- reason — *because*
Prepositions

Prepositions introduce nouns or phrases to link them to other parts of the sentence and signal the function of the phrase.

They locate nouns or phrases in:

- time or place — on fire, at the beach, in the swampy field, throughout the text
- spatial relation — above water, under the influence, next to useless, inside the apple
- direction — to, on, in, into, onto etc. manner — despite all appearances.

Pronouns

Pronouns allow repeated reference to a concept without repeating a noun. My cat [noun] is white. Its [possessive pronoun] mother is black.

Some examples:

- personal — I, me, you, they, he, she, it, we, us
- possessive — our(s), my, mine, your(s), her(s), his, their(s), its
- reflexive — yourself, ourselves
- demonstrative — those, these, this
- indefinite — each, all, any, some
- interrogative — whose, which, what, whom.
Level of clauses and sentences

Moving ‘upwards' within the model of writing, we reach clauses. Clauses are the smallest structures that can contain a unified proposition.

**Clauses**

Unlike phrases or other grammatically connected groups of words, clauses contain a verb and its **object**. In addition, **independent clauses** contain a **subject**. Independent clauses can stand alone but in complex sentences they form the main clause.

- Phrase — *to the beach* (preposition + noun group)
- Independent clause — *I run to the beach* (subject + verb + object)
- Subordinate clause — *when I run to the beach* (conjunction + subject + verb + object phrase)

**Coordinated clauses**

A coordinated clause is a sentence capable of standing by itself but joined to another stand-alone clause by a **conjunction** *(and, or, but, not only … but also etc.)*.

- *Greer wants to go skiing at Mt Buffalo and then [Greer/she] wants to go to Sovereign Hill.*
- *I love chocolate but [I] don’t really like lollies.*

Two or more coordinated clauses joined with a conjunction construct a **compound sentence**. Compound sentences join together propositions that have equal ranking or status. Only the sequence in these sentences suggests the order in which a reader should attend to the meaning.

**Subordinate clauses**

A subordinate clause is a fragment of a sentence that provides extra information related to that given in a main or **independent clause**.

- *They became lost [main] when they missed the turn [subordinate].*

Subordinate clauses can give information about the participants within a main clause.

- *Girls who are too concerned about body image can develop anorexia.*

In indirect speech, subordinate clauses can give information projected by a participant within the clause.

- *My friend said that he wouldn’t be home that early.*

A **complex sentence** is formed when one main clause is joined by a subordinating conjunction to one or more subordinate clauses. Complex sentences contain clauses of **unequal** ranking or status.
**Sentences**

Sentences are either a single clause or a combination of clauses. As mood structures, they provide information about the writer’s relationship with an audience and the way information is to be regarded.

When an independent clause is allowed to stand alone, it forms a **simple sentence** with a subject (Mary) a verb (goes) and an object (off to the shop). Some simple sentences can become quite elaborate, e.g.

> *Papua New Guinea [subject] has [verb] a large number of active volcanoes. [object].*

The order of sentence elements given in this example is the usual one: subject, verb, object. By changing the order, different emphases can be created, e.g. *Off to the shop goes Mary.*

Sentences can take different forms:

- **declaratives** — used to make statements
- **interrogatives** — used to ask questions
- **imperatives** — used to give orders
- **exclamations** — used to express strong emotion, usually of surprise or disgust.

These forms indicate the mood or power relationships between the writer and the intended audience. Students need to develop control over a repertoire of sentence forms to manage their stance and their audience appeal.

**Theme**

This term refers to the ordering of information within a clause. The theme of a clause is most often the **subject** of the clause and, in **declarative sentences** (sentences that make statements) it is often the participant in the stated event:

> *Allan was hit by the bus.*

The theme is usually placed at the beginning of the clause. It highlights to the reader the most significant component of the clause. However, other components of the clause can be in **theme position**:

> *Around the corner came the speeding bus that hit Allan.*

Where the subject is not the theme, there is a level of increased emphasis given to the idea presented as theme.
Level of paragraph or proposition

Paragraphs are used to group the major ideas or propositions within a text. This organizes the ideas, thus helping readers to recognise the significant ideas and make associations between them. Paragraphs are also used to mark shifts in the flow of the text.

Properly constructed, a paragraph leaves the reader in no doubt about how it links to what comes before and after it. This might require connective words or phrases (see next page).

A paragraph has a topic sentence that indicates the substance of the paragraph. A topic sentence can be a summary of the ideas that appear in the paragraph or a super-ordinate idea or generalised statement that is exemplified or elaborated in the paragraph. Generally, the topic sentence appears at the beginning of the paragraph, but it need not necessarily do so.

Level of text

Moving up to the overall text level, there are a number of different devices that are used to organise and link the ideas in the text.

Cohesion

Cohesion is used to describe the devices that help move a reader through the text. Cohesion works in two major ways. One is called grammatical cohesion and works through the use of words that refer readers backwards and forwards through the text. These work largely through the use of the structural words that constitute the closed word classes.

Pronouns

These connect all the ideas associated with a basic noun. They either connect with a noun that has already been introduced or they can be introduced before the noun to which they refer. Skilled writers are able to use pronouns that are not defined in the text but which are defined by strong inferred connections to commonly held knowledge.

Where multiple or long pronoun strings are introduced, the noun-pronoun reference needs to be re-established at the beginning of each paragraph. Where the distance between the referent and the pronoun is too great or where a reader may become confused by multiple pronoun strings, the pronoun needs to be redefined.

Connectives

Whereas conjunctions link two parts of a sentence together, connectives link two sentences or two paragraphs together. Connectives show relations of:

- time
  - subsequent action — *since then, after that, next, finally, as soon as, soon afterward*
  - prior action — *at first, until then, earlier*
  - concurrent action — *at the same time, meanwhile*

- cause
  - result — *as a result, therefore, consequently*
  - reason — *because of, so that, due to*
  - inference — *otherwise, in that case, then*
  - condition — *granted that, considering how, now that, as long as*
• addition
  - equality — and, moreover, besides, furthermore, similarly
  - restatement — indeed, actually, namely, that is
  - example — for example, first, second, third, next, then, finally
  - summation — thus, overall, therefore, in conclusion, in short, in fact

• contrast
  - antithesis — but, yet, rather, on the other hand
  - alternative — alternatively, however, rather than
  - comparison — in comparison, in contrast, likewise
  - concession — though, however, anyhow, in any case, despite that.

The second way in which cohesion is developed is through the association between ideas. This is often referred to as **lexical cohesion**. These word associations are created by:

- repetition — *Algy met a bear. The bear was bulgy.*
- synonyms — *The dragon was a coward, and she called him Custard.*
- antonyms — *The wolf was happy, which gave the pig every reason to be sad.*
- collocation or associations of words around the same subject — *As the jockey travelled to the racecourse, he wondered about his new mount. It was a stablemate of his last ride but was it a stallion or a mare? It would need the speed of Pegasus to win this race.*

  Collocation is the weakest form of lexical cohesion. Used alone or as the dominant method of cohesion, it forces a reader to read and clarify using their own background knowledge. This can lead to ambiguous or confused understanding on the part of a reader.

- taxonomies such as part to whole — *Custard the dragon had big sharp teeth,*
  *And spikes on top of him and scales underneath.*

  And class to subclass — *A well-known amphibian is the green frog.*

Stronger and unambiguous links between ideas and clear referencing between ideas will make the text more coherent and thus readable.
Punctuation

Punctuation is part of the orthographic code through which language is created on a page. It marks out the semantic boundaries between ideas and the function of particular words.

Capital letters

Capitals are required for:
- proper nouns — Sally, Brisbane
- proper adjectives — a Chinese restaurant
- beginnings of sentences
- titles — The Courier-Mail.

Capital letters can also be used to give emphasis to the writing — 'NO!' he screamed.

End marks

A full stop is required at the end of a declarative or imperative sentence. A question mark follows an interrogative sentence. An exclamation mark follows an exclamatory sentence.
- The crocodile chased the boys. (declarative)
- Don't touch that book. (imperative)
- How are you going to get to the other side? (interrogative)
- This piece of writing is GREAT! (exclamative)

As students develop their understanding of sentences, particularly when they start to build elaborated or sophisticated clause complexes, they may for a short time lose their sense of where the sentence boundaries are.

Apostrophes

Apostrophes should be used to show:
- possessive singular nouns — sister's hat
- possessive plural nouns — students' bags.
  Plural nouns that do not end in s are punctuated in the same way as singular nouns — children's
- the letters left out of a contraction — isn't (is not).

Commas

Commas tell the reader to pause between words and thus to keep ideas separate. They can be used to:
- separate the simple sentences in compound sentences — Some students were having lunch, but others were playing.
- separate an initial subordinate clause from the main clause: After studying hard, I retired.
- separate ideas in a list — Apples, peaches, apricots and grapes are grown in Stanthorpe.
- mark out a noun or noun phrase in apposition — Napoleon, Emperor of France, institutionalised many of the reforms from the French revolution.
- separate introductory words such as Well, …; Yes, …; So, …; from the remainder of the clause.
Semicolons These are used where a strong pause is needed but where the ideas are still strongly related and form part of the same sentence — *A burning twig snapped in the stove; the kettle hummed in an undertone.*

They can also be used in sentences that are constructed as a list — *Multi-coloured umbrellas were going up — tilting at the sun; beach towels were being spread out; children were running everywhere.*

Colons Colons introduce a list or a quotation. They are also used where an author wants to clarify or expand on an idea — *He turned his horse and headed for home, tearing at breakneck speed down the narrow road: the very road he had just travelled.* (clarification) *Her mother entered the room and was struck by an overwhelming feeling of loneliness: something to do with the book.* (elaboration) Colons are often replaced by an em dash: *And the murderer was still there — in this very room, creeping towards him in the dark.*

Marks of elision (ellipsis) Ellipsis marks are used to:

- show where words have been omitted from an expression or thought
- increase suspense or a sense of mystery — *He stopped short, suddenly realising something … There were no taps in there.*

Quotation marks These are used to indicate:

- the names of short works or parts of a whole work. Titles of large, self-contained works are normally underlined/italicised, but quotation marks may be used too.
- boundaries of quotations taken from other sources
- the speaker’s exact words in direct speech — ‘*Where*, asked the tourist, ‘*is the turn-off to the Black Stump?*’

The punctuation marks relating to the words quoted belong inside the quotation marks.

*Direct speech and ‘paragraphing’* — When a new speaker begins, the convention is to begin a new line. Knowledge of this convention does **not** mean that a student knows how to construct proper paragraphs with an internal structure.