

# A Basic Guide to Writing Good English

This basic guide (let's call it *BG*) is intended for use along with the books, booklets and article named here. I recommend all five for students who are capable of understanding one of them, Raymond Murphy's *Essential Grammar in Use*, but are still at the elementary level of English as a further language, or not far above it. Most should seek a version of that book with explanations in their native language, if it is available, as it is – in China – in Chinese. Go right through Murphy (in spite of p.viii!), adding two sentences of your own to each unit.

You need the *Oxford Essential Dictionary*, or something very similar: it **MUST** have many example-sentences, and the *OEssD* not only has those, printed in italics, but also often, within them and in bold italics, combinations to remember (as in, at 'discriminate', "*This company discriminates against women ...*"). Do not think that an electronic dictionary is all you need: you must have a printed dictionary, **with a vocabulary consisting only of common words**, in which you can gradually mark and learn most of those words and their uses. (Put a dash by any word which is not as yet valuable for you.)

Taking words and in most cases example-sentences from such a dictionary, do plenty of the kind of work explained in the booklet *Sentences to Study and Change (SSC)*. Make sure that you know well and understand **everything** on pages 7 and 8. (It is vital to learn to do what is called **parsing**, orally and in writing.) Once the two initial sheets are completed, a good aim for most students is six pages (three sheets) a week. Revise them and the corrections you receive. The SSC method will efficiently expand your effective vocabulary, so that you have **an increasing stock of words you know how to use**.

Learn too everything in the booklet *Learningguild Notes on English 1 (LNE 1)* and, later, everything in the more advanced article "Questions and principles for sentence-construction" (QPS) on pp.11-16 of *Learningguild Letter 1.2013* (on our website at 'Publications'). Gradually do the correcting or improving of the numbered examples of error there.

Get to know well these guidelines, follow them, and use them in checking your work:

1. Make a habit of asking yourself "What part of speech do I need **here**?"

The *OEssD* gives you *analyse* (verb) and *analysis* (noun). If you want a noun for a person who does analysis, or a corresponding adjective or adverb, you'll need a bigger dictionary, perhaps an electronic one, to find *analyst*, *analytical*, and *analytically*. Learn such **word-families**, and become good at using, in writing and in speech, **the part of speech that is right for the particular place**.

2. Write plainly and concisely.

Don't let your sentences get too long for your present level of English. Many students at the elementary level should keep their own sentences within about 25 words. In essays, use accepted constructions with which you have become familiar, often beginning with a subject-locution and its matching verb (*SSC* p.7).

3. Master the use of the articles *a*, *an* and *the*.

First study *SSC* p.8, 3, and *LNE 1*. 3, and so learn to call nouns not, as Murphy does, countable or uncountable, but NCs or NUs. On whether or not to use *the* with plural nouns, consider the difference between a very general statement, e.g., “**Results** aren’t all that matters” and one referring to a particular set, e.g., “**The results** have been disappointing.” Study instances of *a*, *an* and especially *the* in *OEssD*’s example-sentences for other words.

4. In general, avoid using, before a noun and as adjectives, two or more words mostly used as nouns. Even one such word is often better given a different place.

Not ‘its oil product price’ but ‘its price for oil products’; not ‘energy importance’ but ‘the importance of energy’.

5. If a verb is used transitively (*SSC* p.8, 2), be clear on whether you are or need to be using it in the active voice or the passive voice, as they are called (Murphy Units 21 and 22), and what the right form of your verb is.

We cannot say *is emerged*, because *emerge* is used only intransitively: so *is emerging* or *has emerged*. Every passive verb-form ends with a past participle and, before that word, has a part of the *be* family, as in *is produced*.

6. With nouns and verbs, ask often “Singular or plural here?”.

Often you will need a **matching pair**: ‘the girl runs’ (singular, singular) but ‘the girls run’ (plural, plural). An added *s* or *es* is the usual sign of the plural for nouns, but of the 3S (third-person singular) for most verbs that are “present simple”. See *LNE 1*. 4 and 5, and then *QPS 2* and 1(in that order).

7. Use the right tense and “aspect” (simple or continuous).

Murphy’s units 1-28 are very helpful, and especially 8, 14 and 20, where you have to choose between the two aspects or between two tenses.

8. Often employ **parallelism**, the precise combination of two or more items (usually words or sets of words) which are “parallel”: in the simplest cases, as below, they are the same kind of verb-form or the same part of speech.

“In our garden I like to **sow** and later **transplant tomato and lettuce.**” Two verbs (both infinitives, sharing the particle *to*: Murphy Unit 52) after the one verb *like*, and two nouns which, with *and*, make the object-locution of both those two verbs.

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