Key writing skills

In order to write English confidently and accurately, it is important that you have a sound understanding of the various technicalities of writing, such as the different parts of speech, punctuation, spelling, grammar and usage. In order to ensure your understanding of these, the following sections contain the main details that you should be familiar with. There are also some exercises to test your understanding.

Parts of speech

The different words in a sentence have different functions. In order to have a clear understanding of the mechanics of writing, it is important to know the names of the different parts of speech and to be aware of their features.

> **Key terms**
>
> **Nouns:** are naming words; they apply to the names given to persons, places or things.

Nouns

The different types of nouns are as follows:

- **Common nouns:** A common noun is the name of any unspecified person, place or thing, for example girl, town, car.

- **Proper nouns:** A proper noun is the name given to a particular person, place or thing, for example Leena, Mumbai, Toyota.

- **Abstract nouns:** An abstract noun is the name given to something intangible like an idea, for example thought, love, happiness.

- **Collective nouns:** A collective noun is a single word, which describes a collection of things or people, for example flock, team, audience, queue. There is no hard and fast rule as to whether collective nouns should be considered grammatically as singular or plural. However, if the collection of things is functioning as a single unit then it should be expressed using the singular. If, however, the noun describes a collection of individuals functioning independently, then it could be expressed using the plural.

Think of the difference between these two statements: *The team was playing well* and *The team were playing badly.*

Verbs

> **Key terms**
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> **Verbs:** are words which express an action or a state of being and are central to the structure of a sentence.

> **For example**
> i   The boy *kicked* the football.
> ii   The tap *dripped*.
> iii The caterpillar *became* a butterfly.

In each of these examples the verb is the word written in italics.

In the first example, the verb 'kicked' is followed by the noun 'football', which is referred to technically as the object of the verb. A verb which is followed by an object is called a **transitive verb**.

In the second example, there is no object in the sentence and a verb like 'dripped', which is not followed by an object is, therefore, called an **intransitive verb**.

Finally, the verb in the third example 'became' expresses a state of being and not an action. In this sentence, the subject of the verb 'caterpillar' and the word following it 'butterfly' refer to the same thing; the word following verbs like 'become' is referred to as the complement of the sentence.

A **finite or main ver**b is a form of verb, which expresses an action or state of being, which is complete in itself. It has tense (past, present or future) and number (singular or plural); for example: I *walked* along the road. He *waits* for me at the corner. It *is* a fine day. There *are* no clouds in the sky. Tomorrow *will bring* both sunshine and rain. All of these simple sentences make complete sense and it is the form of the verb which ensures that this is so.

Another feature of a finite verb is that it can be in either the active or the passive voice. In the former, the subject of the verb performs the action ('The dog *bit* the man') whereas in the latter, the subject suffers the action of the verb ('The man *was bitten* by the dog').

Not all forms of the verb, however, convey a complete meaning and, therefore, need to relate to something else in the sentence. Such forms of the verb are known as **non-finite**.

The most common non-finite parts of a verb are the infinitive (to laugh; to burn etc), the present participle (laughing; burning) and the past participle (laughed, burnt).

When used in sentences, the infinitive functions as a noun – He liked to *laugh*. The participles usually function as adjectives – The *laughing* man fell off his chair; The *burnt* wood was still smoking several hours after the fire started.

Pronouns

> **Key terms**
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> **Pronoun:** is a word used in place of a noun such as I, you, he, she, it, we, they, this, that, anyone, anybody etc. Use of pronouns prevents unnecessary and clumsy repetitions of nouns.

For example:
'Vijay and his sister went to the river to swim. When Vijay and his sister arrived there, Vijay and his sister found that the river was dried up.'

By using a pronoun the meaning would be more effectively expressed: 'Vijay and his sister went to the river to swim. When *they* arrived there, *they* found that it was dried up.'

Adjectives

> **Key terms**
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> **Adjective:** is a word used to describe a noun.

> **For example**
> The *red* house had a *huge* bedroom in which some very *naughty* children could be found.

Adverbs

Key terms

Adverb: is a word which qualifies (that is, adds to the meaning of) a verb, an adjective or another adverb. Many, but not all, adverbs end in –ly.

For example

i   The boy finished his dinner *quickly*.
ii I had a *rather* small breakfast.

In the first example an adverb is used to qualify a verb, in the second the adverb qualifies an adjective and in the third, one adverb qualifies another.

Prepositions

Key terms

Preposition: is a word used with a following noun or pronoun to show the connection between persons or things. Common prepositions include: about, above, across, against, along, around, at, before, behind, beneath, beside, between, by, down, during, except, for, from, near, off, on, over, round, since, till, towards, under, until, up, upon.

Articles

Key terms

The word 'the' is referred to as **the definite article**; the words 'a' and 'an' are known as **indefinite articles**.

Conjunctions and interjections

Key terms

Conjunction: is a word used to connect words or groups of words.

For example

and, or, but, however.

An interjection is a word used to express a feeling such as joy or anger and is usually indicated by the use of an exclamation mark.

For example

What! Oh! Hurray!

Parts of speech exercise

Exercise 1

Read the following passage and then complete the table provided by identifying the function of each word in it.

It was raining heavily. Amrit was sitting indoors, eating a cake and watching television. He was bored as the television programme was dull and uninteresting. Oh, how he wished the rain would stop! However, the weather did not seem to upset his younger sister, Rita; she was sitting happily on the floor and reading a book that was full of brightly coloured pictures.

Nouns	Verbs	Adjectives	Adverbs	Pronouns	Prepositions	Conjunctions	Interjections

Sentence types and structures

Some definitions

A phrase is a group of words which does not contain a finite verb. For example: 'The dog, *lazing in the sun*, seemed thoroughly content with life.' The words in italics together comprise a phrase beginning with a present participle and, in this case, they function together as an adjective describing the dog.

A clause is a group of words which does contain a finite verb. There are two types of clauses: main clauses and subordinate clauses. A main clause is a single unit of sense and can stand alone to make complete sense. For example: '*Salim ate his breakfast.*' However, a subordinate clause does not make complete sense on its own; it is dependent on a main clause to which it relates; for example, '*Salim ate his breakfast which he had cooked all by himself*'. In this sentence, although the subordinate clause provides further information about Salim's breakfast, it does not make sense unless the reader knows the content of the preceding main clause. The word *which* is what is known as a relative pronoun (other common relative pronouns are *who* and *that*) and is used to join two clauses together.

A main clause, therefore, can, like the example above, function as a sentence. Such a sentence (consisting of just one main clause) is known as a simple sentence. A sentence which consists of two or more main clauses joined by a conjunction or conjunctions ('Salim ate his breakfast *and* then he left the house and walked to school.') is known as a compound sentence. Finally, a sentence which contains a mixture of main and subordinate clauses ('Salim ate his breakfast, which he had cooked all by himself, and then left the house to go to school which was on the other side of town.') is known as a complex sentence.

Just as it is important to demonstrate that you are in command of a varied vocabulary, it is equally important to show that you can use a range of sentence structures to add variety and interest to your writing. Try to include a balance of simple and complex sentences so that you avoid monotony; in general, the more involved your ideas are, the more you are likely to use lengthy sentences. However, short sentences are often a very effective way to add emphasis to your writing.

Again, the type of sentence structures that you use will help to determine the tone of your writing. Consistently using complex sentences will create a formal tone which is suitable for argumentative essays whereas shorter sentences might well be more effective for a narrative essay. The ability to show control of complex sentences and structures in your writing, however, is one of the criteria that teachers usually look for in writing which is of very good standard.

Sentence joining exercises

Exercise 1

Combine each of the following pairs or groups of short sentences into one longer sentence. You can omit words and alter the wording where necessary. Do not rely too much on the use of simple conjunctions such as *and*.

1 One afternoon I went for a stroll. The town was strangely quiet. There were very few people on the streets. The sky was of an ominous grey colour.

2 The school is situated in the countryside. It is an old redbrick building. It is easily seen amidst the surrounding fields.

3 Jasmine's mother works very hard. She cooks for all the family. She goes to the market every day. She wishes she could afford to employ a maid.

4 We were lost. We had been walking in circles for the last three hours. Every tree in the jungle looked the same. Night was starting to fall. It was growing dark.

5 Nissar was late leaving home. He drove his car quickly. He had a long way to travel. He had to meet his friends at the club. He knew they would not wait there for long.

Exercise 2

Here is an episode of a story set out in note form. Tell the story in full using no more than three paragraphs and paying particular attention to sentence building. You may include additional details as appropriate.

Mr Patel has a bad memory – forgets important details – arranges special celebration for wife's birthday – invites many friends and family members – hires town hall for the party – employs two top quality chefs to prepare food – books a popular band to play music – no expense spared – guests due to arrive at 7.30 pm – Mr Patel and wife arrive 7.00 – no-one else there by 8.00 – Mr Patel and wife are a little worried – by 9.00 – no-one there apart from Mr and Mrs Patel, the chefs and the band – Mr Patel in despair – decides to phone people – realises he has left cell phone behind – goes home to fetch it – opens up desk to pick up phone – discovers bundle of invitations – he had forgotten to post them.

Accuracy of expression

Use correct grammar and punctuation

To produce a good piece of work in Continuous Writing, it is important that your writing is secure in the use of the main punctuation marks. Remember, the point of punctuation is to help the reader grasp the meaning of what you are writing; you cannot communicate clearly without using punctuation accurately.

The most important punctuation marks are as following.

Full Stop (.)
The full stop is used to indicate a long pause and to mark the end of a sentence.

Comma (,)
The comma is used to indicate a short pause; it should never be used to mark the end of a sentence.

Semicolon (;)
The semicolon is used to indicate a longer pause than a comma and is also used to link two main clauses with a common subject.

Question Mark (?)
The question mark is used instead of a full stop at the end of a direct question.

Exclamation Mark (!)
The exclamation mark is used instead of a full stop at the end of a sentence after making an exclamation. It is also used after an interjection.

Apostrophe (')
The apostrophe is used either to show possession or to indicate the omission of a letter or letters.

Speech Marks (" ")
The speech marks are used to indicate direct speech.

Colon (:)
The colon is used to introduce a statement or quotation or to act as a pause or balancing point between two balanced statements.

When punctuating a sentence never put in a stop at any place unless a pause is required in the reading.

A guide to the use of the more complicated punctuation marks follows.

Full stops

A full stop is used to mark the end of a sentence. For example: '*It was a wet and cold morning in the middle of November. Padma, warm and comfortable beneath the covers, did not want to get out of bed.*' Here there are two separate statements, each containing a main verb and each with a different subject; it is, therefore, correct to indicate the pause between them by using a full stop.

A full stop is also used to indicate words that are abbreviated when the abbreviated form of the word ends with a different letter from the full form of the word.
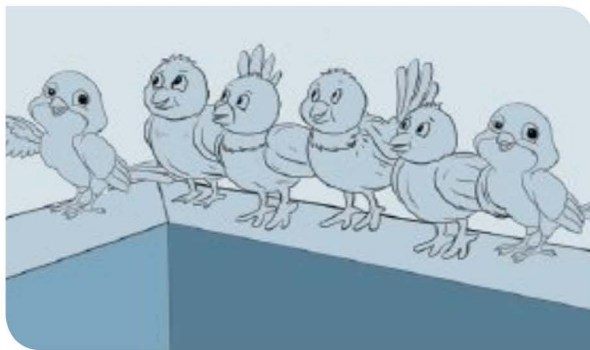
> **For example**
> '3rd Sept.'

Commas

The following are the main occasions when commas should be used; the first six are purely mechanical, the other two require a little more thought.

1   To separate words or phrases in a list or series (except for the last two which are usually joined by 'and'). For example: '*In the kitchen there were a large oven, pots, pans, bottles, glasses and a stand containing cutlery.*'

2   To mark off the name or title of a person being spoken to. For example: '*Padma, there's someone at the door to see you.*' or '*Excuse me, sir, you've just dropped your wallet.*'

3   To mark off words or phrases in apposition. For example: '*The restaurant owner, Mr. Miah, is a very rich man.*' or '*Mr. Miah, the restaurant owner, is a very rich man.*'

4   To mark off words and phrases such as 'however', 'therefore', 'by the way', 'nevertheless', 'moreover' etc. that have been interjected into a sentence. For example: '*At the same time, however, you should be very careful.*'

5   To mark off phrases beginning with a participle when a pause is required in the reading. For example: '*My sister, seeing that I was upset, asked me what was the matter.*'

6   In conjunction with speech marks to indicate the beginning of a passage of direct speech: '*The teacher stood up and said, "……..*"

7 To separate an adjectival clause beginning with 'who', 'whom' or 'which' from the rest of the sentence, when it is non-defining.

This is a particularly tricky use of the comma, but the following example will help to explain the point: '*The Queen ordered that all the birds, which were sitting on the wall, should be fed.*'

In the above sentence, the clause which were sitting on the wall must be non-defining and, therefore, implies that all the birds in existence happened to be sitting on the Queen's wall. However, if the commas were omitted, the sense would be that the Queen ordered that only the birds sitting on the wall were to be fed (those in the trees and on the grass were presumably to go hungry!).

8 To break up a sentence into smaller parts and to help the reader to grasp the meaning. For example: '*Ajay, clumsy and awkward, stumbled into the room, knocked over a small table and then, before he could do any more damage, sank into the nearest chair.*'

Semicolons

A semicolon is used for two main purposes.

1 To separate two main clauses when a conjunction such as 'and' or 'but' is omitted. For example: '*Rita felt particularly tired that morning; she did not want to get out of bed.*'

2 To separate clauses or phrases in a list or series. For example: '*Salim jumped out of the chair; quickly walked out of the room; slammed the door behind him; searched for his bicycle in the garden and then rode off quickly to find his friends.*'

Colons

There are three main uses for the colon.

1 To separate two clauses where the second explains more fully the meaning of the first. For example: '*He was feeling very cheerful that morning: the sun was shining and it was the first day of the summer holidays.*'

2 To introduce a number of items in a list. For example: '*Before departure, please check that you have the following: passport, money, tickets, change of clothes and cell phones.*'

3 To introduce a speech or quotation. For example: '*Juliet: Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?*'

Apostrophes

The apostrophe is used for two main purposes; the first one is quite straight- forward; the second is a little more complicated.

1 To indicate the omission of a letter or letters when a word or words have been contracted. For example: 'I didn't do that. It's not true. You weren't there.'

2 To indicate possession. In English, the possessive form of a noun is shown as following.

a In the singular, the possessive form is made by adding –'s

girl	the girl's book
boy	the boy's hat
house	the house's windows

b In the plural, when the plural is made by adding –s to the singular, the possessive is made by adding an apostrophe after the –s (s')

girls	the girls' books
boys	the boys' hats
houses	the houses' windows

Notes

1 When the plural of a noun is not made by adding –s, the possessive is made by adding –'s.

men	the men's office
children	the children's toys
women	the women's cars

2 The apostrophe is required in expressions like: a month's wait; a week's holiday; an hour's journey.