

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR WRITING SKILLS

Tips from an English Language Teacher





IMPROVING YOUR WRITING SKILLS

There is a strong relationship between your English language improvement and the development of your writing skills. When you learn English (or any language, including your native language), the normal learning order is listening, then speaking, then reading, and finally, writing.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN READING AND WRITING

Many students of English don't like reading very much and this leads to a dislike of writing, as the two are related. This is a shame as well as a major barrier to writing. Be aware of typical problems that affect speakers of your first language as well as sounds that you may find personally challenging.

READING IS A VITAL PART OF LEARNING

- Grammar
- Vocabulary
- Collocation
- Spelling
- Reading comprehension
- Writing

How so? If you read a lot (or even a reasonable amount) you are constantly seeing good examples of grammar. You will see (without actually studying in a deep way) when native speakers and expert users of English use one tense rather than another.

You will see and be forced to guess vocabulary from context (because neither do you want to nor should you use the dictionary for every new word you meet).

You will get used to the collocations (words that go together, like ancient history, but vintage car) commonly used in English. You will also see correct spelling (note that there are differences between American and British English spelling – don't worry, they are both English!) which will improve your spelling over time. Naturally, the more you read, the better you will become at understanding the content of other people's writing. You are also constantly seeing good examples of writing which helps you when it is your turn to write.

WHY IS WRITING SO DIFFICULT?

One of the other reasons that reading helps your writing is that it helps give you ideas.

This is one of the biggest problems for writers in general, not only language students – what do I write about? This is especially a problem if you are young and don't have a lot of experience or general knowledge. Reading is how you improve both of these things (along with listening, of course).

In addition to ideas, a writer also needs to know how to put their ideas together with grammar and vocabulary. As students improve to about the Intermediate level, they might become comfortable speaking, as they have to do this a lot in class (Note: learners who study in Australia or other English-speaking countries speak much more than students who attend classes in their native country). They don't always focus on their use of grammar and vocabulary because they are trying to communicate ideas, opinions or information. They might use simple structures – many high level

students really only speak in present or future tenses – because they are interested in the message.

Everything changes when it comes to writing. Suddenly, the writer is more likely to become very focused on not making mistakes, and it becomes very hard to write. They might feel depressed. Others write exactly as they speak, full of mistakes they might not have noticed so much when they were speaking. When they get writing back with lots of red marks all over it, they can feel depressed.

HOW CAN I OVERCOME THESE WRITING PROBLEMS?

You need to be smart when you practise writing. There is a famous saying, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting a different result.” One thing I find most frustrating with my EAP and IELTS students is that they always want me to mark all their mistakes. This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly,

it is de-motivating to see so many mistakes every time you write, and the harder you try, the more likely you are to make little mistakes. Losing motivation is the biggest barrier to improving. It is important to have little victories often and to stay focused.

Secondly, it isn't realistic or helpful to focus on all mistakes. For example, how could you avoid a mistake with the third conditional if you haven't learned it yet? It is better to focus on grammar mistakes that you have learned. So, straight after studying the third conditional, it would be smart to try to use it in your next piece of writing. By this, I don't mean writing a series of sentences in the third conditional. I mean trying one or two sentences in a longer piece of writing. When you receive feedback, check this structure – “Did I get it right?” If so, great. If not, try again and fix it. Then get feedback again. It is far more realistic to fix a mistake you have learned, rather than puzzle over a

mistake when you don't know what the rule is. Another problem I find is that students do the same type of writing every time. Again, this is very hard to do.

What do you focus on? You can't focus on everything. So, instead of writing an entire essay (if you are trying to improve your IELTS marks), you should focus on different aspects each time you practice, and/or give yourself different goals.

For example:

- Write four introductions to four different essay questions. Focus on a clear thesis statement, or work toward writing one introduction in three minutes.
- Write a plan in three minutes and then write only the topic sentences for each paragraph.
- Choose six new words or phrases from the same topic and use them all in one paragraph. Do the same with six transition signals.





- If you write easily, write one paragraph where you focus on writing as accurately as possible.
- If you struggle to write quickly, challenge yourself to write as much as you can in four minutes, without stopping (see next page for my favourite writing lesson).*
- Write focusing on vocabulary and use new words that you have recently learned.
- Write one body paragraph with the structure your teacher has taught you.
- Write an entire essay to the best of your ability, and don't worry about how long it takes.
- Write the essay in 40 minutes.
- Always re-write, fixing mistakes that you know you should know. You can leave the others, or ask about them if you wish.
- Study good essays and make a note of all the features you know belong in an essay, to see how the writer achieved it.

- Don't only focus on grammar!

IDEALLY, YOU SHOULD DO THE FOLLOWING:

- Choose a focus for your writing, like those above (Please note, you can't focus on everything).
- Tell your teacher or the person marking your work what you focused on and ask them to only mark those mistakes.
- When you get your feedback, fix those mistakes.

If you do this, you maximise your chances of learning. Hopefully, you will feel more motivated in this way, and you will make improvements. Remember, you cannot fix a mistake, if you haven't learned the rules. Be kind to yourself.

DEVELOP S.M.A.R.T GOALS

So, to continue this idea of breaking writing down into smaller pieces, so you can tackle each one more easily and successfully, let me introduce you to SMART goals.

SMART STANDS FOR:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Ambitious
- Realistic
- Time-bound

SPECIFIC – "Learning English" isn't a very specific goal. What does it mean exactly? It could mean "Get a seven in IELTS", but that isn't specific either if you don't know what you need to do to get a seven.

Examples of specific goals:

- Learn five new verbs this week.
- Transcribe the words of your favourite song or a scene from a movie you like.
- Learn when to use present perfect vs past simple.
- Complete a 250-word essay in 40 minutes.

MEASURABLE – You can see that you will know if you have achieved the small goals above. This is because they are specific, small and manageable.

AMBITIOUS – Don't make your goals too easy. Push yourself a little bit, it will help motivate you.

REALISTIC – On the other hand, if your goals are too ambitious and difficult, you will lose motivation and not reach your goals. Find a balance between realism and ambition.

TIME-BOUND – Give yourself a deadline and make sure some of those deadlines are close. Deadlines that are too far away are harder to reach. Learn five new verbs this week. Be able to write a 250-word essay in 40 minutes by the end of next month. These goals are close enough that you can see how you need to break them down to achieve them.

MY ALL-TIME FAVOURITE WRITING EXERCISE

This is an exercise you can do every day if you want to. You could do it before any writing practice session, or when you feel like it. It is used by professional writers to overcome

“writer’s block”. This is the fear of the blank page and the terrible question – “What do I write?”

It is a writing fluency activity. The focus is on IDEAS not on writing correctly.

Use a blank piece of paper, with or without lines and a pencil or pen. Find or think of a topic. It could be general like “Why I love my mum” or related to a topic you just learned about Climate Change. It shouldn't be too complex.

HERE ARE THE RULES:

- Use a timer set for three to five minutes.
- You cannot use your eraser.
- You cannot cross anything out.
- Write whatever comes into your head about the topic.
- If you cannot think of anything, write “I don't know what to write about” or “this is stupid” or whatever, until you can think of something on the topic.
- Do not stop writing until the timer goes off.

- Write as fast as you can.
- Never show it to anyone.
- GO!

The purpose of this exercise is the same as brainstorming. It allows you to get past all the bad ideas and the silly ideas, and find the ideas that are interesting and good. It lets you stop – if only for three to five minutes – the little voice, the nasty judge, inside your head who tells you that your ideas are stupid or wrong, or that you just made a mistake. Just run over that nasty judge!

Then, look at what you wrote. Are there any interesting or good ideas? Don't worry about the grammar or spelling. Focus on the ideas. Then, you can take that one or those few ideas and write about them with a little more care, if you wish.

You'll see that you can write quite a lot and that you do have some good ideas even though you don't always let yourself believe it.



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