

Basic Grammar Tips

1) Articles

There are three main **articles** in English: **a**, **an**, and **the**.

They appear before nouns or noun phrases, and can be classified as definite or indefinite.

Definite: “The” can be used with singular or plural nouns, and refers to one or more people, places, or things already mentioned specifically in discussion, or nouns which are about to be described specifically:

the animal shelter downtown

Indefinite: “A/an” is used as an indicator of any singular object, not particularly one under discussion. “A” is used with a noun beginning with a consonant sound, and “an” is used before nouns beginning with a vowel sound:

a college undergraduate student

an icy highway

Markers can also be placed before nouns instead of articles: this, that, these, those, my, his, her, your, our, their, its, any, either, each, every, many, few, several, some, all

- For a more detailed explanation, see our handout “Articles: Rules and Exceptions to the Rules.”

2) Ordering Adjectives

An adjective modifies a noun; it describes the quality, state or action that a noun refers to.

- i) Adjectives can come before nouns: *a new* house
- ii) Adjectives can come after certain verbs: that house looks *old*
- iii) Adjectives can be modified by adverbs: *a very expensive* house

Adjectives can be used as complements to a noun:

the renovations make the house *expensive*

If you decide to use more than one adjective to modify your noun, you must follow proper order. Use the table below as a guideline:

Article	Number	Opinion	Size	Age	Shape	Colour	Material	Origin	Purpose	Noun
The	two	elegant	small	old	square	white	plastic	American	rolling	dice

3) Forming Sentences

There are 5 patterns for building sentences:

Subject-Verb	<i>John sleeps.</i>
Subject-Verb-Object	<i>John loves his job.</i>
Subject-Verb-Adjective	<i>John is funny.</i>
Subject-Verb-Adverb	<i>John is here.</i>
Subject-Verb-Noun	<i>John is the teacher.</i>

Clauses and **phrases** are both clusters of words.

A **phrase** is a word cluster lacking subject and verb combinations:

For the duration of the year

A **clause** contains a subject and a verb. If it forms a complete thought it is an **independent clause**.

If it is an incomplete thought it is a **dependent** or a **subordinate clause**.

While we collected the data, the temperature increased.

dependent clause

independent clause

Coordination and subordination are ways of combining words, phrases, and clauses into more complex forms.

Coordination uses coordinating conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs (with appropriate punctuation), or punctuation to combine short independent clauses into a single sentence. Examples are “so” and the semicolon (;).

The UNBC soccer game has been postponed, **SO** we will have to watch something else.

S

V

↑

S

V

coordinating conjunction

Subordination uses subordinating conjunctions or relative pronouns to transform independent clauses (main clauses or ideas) into dependent clauses (subordinate clauses or ideas).

*The lab results **that** confirm our diagnosis have been sent to the attending physician.*

S

↑

V

V

Relative pronoun

(forms dependent relative clause)

Avoid using **expletives** –words that serve a placeholder function in a sentence and often fill in for the real subject of a clause. They are generally at the beginning of a sentence and confuse the real subject. Examples include "there," "it," and "here," followed by a "to be" linking verb (e.g., was, were, is, are). When this is evident, reorder your sentence to avoid using an expletive.

It is difficult to write well. → To write well is difficult.

There is coffee at Degrees for sale. → Coffee is for sale at Degrees.

4) Tense

There are **12 verb tenses**. Tenses are all used to indicate action that has taken place in the past, present, and future. Tenses should be kept consistent; inconsistencies occur when shifting between past and present tense **without** reflecting actual changes in time. The following example, adapted from *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook 5th Canadian Edition*, illustrates tense shift:

Inconsistent: The main character suffers psychologically because he has a clubfoot, but he eventually triumphed over his disability.

Consistent: The main character suffers psychologically because he has a clubfoot, but he eventually triumphs over his disability.

Note: Use the present tense when discussing the content of literature, film, etc.

	Past	Present	Future
Simple	I ate chocolate cake yesterday.	I eat chocolate cake every day.	I will eat chocolate cake tomorrow.
Continuous	I was eating chocolate cake when you arrived.	I am eating chocolate cake right now.	I will be eating chocolate cake when you arrive.
Perfect	I had eaten all of the chocolate cake when you arrived.	I have eaten all of the chocolate cake.	I will have eaten all of the chocolate cake by the time you arrive.
Perfect Continuous	I had been eating chocolate cake for hours when you arrived.	I have been eating chocolate cake for hours.	I will have been eating chocolate cake for hours when you arrive.

5) Plurals

In English, nouns are divided between the singular and plural form. In order to change a singular noun to its plural form you usually add "s"; these are **regular plurals**: book/books, table/ tables.

Exception 1: Nouns that end in "ch," "s," "sh," "x," or "z" form the plural by adding "es" to the singular.
branch/branches, fox/foxes

Exception 2: Nouns that end in "y" that are preceded by a consonant form the plural by changing the "y" to "i" and then adding an "es."
city/cities

Exception 3: Nouns that end in "f" form the plural by changing the "f" to "v" and then adding an "es."
half/halves, leaf/leaves

Exception 4: Nouns that end in “fe” form the plural by changing the “f” to “v” and then adding only an “s.”
knife/knives, life/lives

There are many **irregular plural** noun forms that one must commit to memory:
man/men, woman/women, child/children, tooth/teeth, mouse/mice, goose/geese

6) Subject-Verb Agreement

Verbs must agree in number with their subjects. The basic rule is that a singular subject takes a singular verb, and a plural subject takes a plural verb.

The book I ordered is on the desk. (singular subject, singular verb)

The books she ordered have arrived. (plural subject, plural verb)

- As with most grammar rules, there are a number of special situations or exceptions to the basic rule. For a more detailed explanation, see the ASC handout “Subject-Verb Agreement.”