

Common Problems for ESL Students: explanations

Adapted in part from A Writer's Reference by Diana Hacker. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1995. and Prentice Hall Reference Guide to Grammar and Usage by Muriel Harris. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc. 1991.

1. The –s ending

- * The –s ending is attached to many nouns in their plural form.
- * If the noun is singular, there is no –s ending.
 - a lot of
- * Phrases such as *a few* indicate that the noun following it is going to be plural, so more often than not, the –s ending will occur.
 - a few cookies
- * One tricky exception to this rule is the phrase, *one and a half*. This phrase is always followed by the plural form of the noun.
 - one and a half inches
- * The phrase *one of the* is always followed by the plural form of the noun.
 - one of the best friends, one of the girls.
- * Note: The –s ending goes on the noun, not the adjective.
 - one of the others, one of the other boys

2. Articles

- * If you are talking about a specific thing, use *the*.
 - **the** book over there, **the** Eiffel Tower
- * If you are talking about something singular that you can count, use *a* or *an*.
 - **a** book from the shelf, **a** tower in France, she was **an** interesting person
- * If you are talking about something that you cannot count or that is abstract, there is no article, but you can use *some*, *any*, or *more*
 - **some** advice, **any** water, truth, English, **more** traffic, love, politics
- * If you are talking about something when you mean *all* or *in general*, there is no article.
 - Fountains are beautiful.
 - In some parts of the world, rice is preferred to all other grains.
- * There are certain idioms in English that always take either *the* or *a/an*, and others that take no article at all.
 - **the** story of your life, **a** few, at first
 - most names of cities, states and countries do not take articles
 - ⊙ Salt Lake City, Louisiana, Australia
 - ⊙ exceptions: **The** Netherlands, **The** Dominican Republic, **The** United States

3. This/that/these/those

- * *This* and *that* refer to singular nouns, while *these* and *those* refer to plural nouns.
 - **this** bag, **these** bags
- * Use *this* or *these* when referring to something nearby, and use *that* or *those* when referring to something far away.
- * Hint: to determine which one fits, try using the words *here* and *there* to show

where the item is. If you can say *here*, use *this* or *these*; if you can say *there*, use *that* or *those*.

- **this** book *here*, **those** books *there*

4. Word order

- * In English, adjectives always come before the noun.
 - the **blue suede** shoes, a **big** cat
- * Adverbs usually come directly after the verb.
 - she walked **quickly**, they talked **noisily**
- * When using an adverb to modify an adjective, the **adverb** comes before the adjective.
 - a **very** large dog
 - the **extremely** noisy girls
- * When using lots of adjectives, there is a specific way to arrange them in the sentence: determiner, evaluation or opinion, physical description (size, length or shape, age, color), nationality, religion, material, noun.
 - four nice, big, round, young, brown, Vietnamese, Catholic, silk dogs
 - Obviously there is no such thing as a Vietnamese, Catholic, silk dog, and you should generally avoid using this many adjectives between a determiner and a noun, but from this you get an idea of the order in which the adjectives you have should come.
 - Note also that when using more than one adjective to describe something, commas come between all adjectives but NOT after the determiner or before the noun.
- * When determining where to place parts of a sentence after the subject and verb, you should be able to answer *who*, then *what*, then *where*, then *when*, then *why*.
 - We gave Judy a pair of slippers at the party on Sunday **because** it was her birthday.
- * Of course, sometimes the *where*, *when*, or *why*, or a combination of these, comes at the beginning of the sentence. In these cases, the rest of the sentence will behave in the usual way.
 - At the party on Sunday, we gave Judy a pair of slippers **because** it was her birthday.
 - **Since** it was her birthday, we gave Judy a pair of slippers at the party on Sunday.
- * On certain occasions, you might come across a sentence that doesn't easily lend itself to these rules. In such cases, it is simply a matter of listening to the way people talk to figure out what is right. Unfortunately, this is true in many languages.

5. Verb forms

- * In most cases, you can tell from the other words in the sentence which tense the verb(s) should be in. If the other words indicate that something took place in the past, the verb(s) should be in the past tense; if they indicate that something is still taking place, the verb(s) should be in the present perfect tense, etc.
 - I **studied** French all day yesterday.
 - I **have been studying** French for seven years.
 - I **had been studying** French for years until I quit last year.

6. Prepositions

- * Preposition rules are largely idiomatic, but there are some guidelines to help you decide which one goes where.
- * It is always *on* a certain day
 - **on** Friday, **on** November 12
- * It is always *in* a certain month
 - **in** January, **in** October
- * It is always *in* a certain year
 - **in** 1995, **in** the year 2000
- * It is always *at* night, or *at* a certain time
 - **at** 9:15pm
- * It is always *in* the morning, the afternoon, or the evening
- * Something is always *on* the surface of something
 - **on** the water, **on** the street

7. **No, not**

- For the most part, deciding between *no* and *not* requires knowledge of English idioms. Sometimes, either of the two would make sense in a sentence, but for the cases that don't work that way, here are some guidelines:
- Use *not* when the blank is followed by a verb or an adjective.
 - I have **not** heard of that.
 - I did **not** know that.
 - That is **not** fair.
 - The dog is **not** ugly.
- Usually, if the blank is followed by an article (or words like *some*, *much*, etc.) and a noun, you should use *not*, because *not* usually goes with singular nouns.
 - There is **not** a cloud in the sky.
 - My father is **not** a liar.
 - There's **not** much time.
- If there is just a noun with no article, use *no*, because *no* usually goes with plural or abstract nouns.
 - There are **no** clouds in the sky.
 - My father is **no** liar.
 - There is **no** time.
- Some idioms include:
 - **not** yet
 - **not** so fast
 - **not** in a million years

8. **Interrogative words**

- * *Who* replaces words and phrases referring to people
 - The girl with the flowered hat wrote the poem ® Who wrote the poem?
- * *Whom* always goes with a preposition, and replaces words and phrases referring to people.
 - She gave the flowers to John. ® To whom did she give the flowers?
- * *Whose* replaces words and phrases referring to people when they are possessive (*the*

girl's, the tall man's)

- The book is his. ⑧ Whose book is this?
- The skis belong to the woman with curly hair. ⑧ Whose skis are these?
 - ⊙ Note: *whose* is often confused, by ESL students and native speakers alike, with *who's*. Remember that *who's* is a contraction of *who* and *is*, and does not fit where you should use *whose*.
- * *What* replaces nouns that do not refer to people, as well as noun phrases.
 - They went to the zoo. ⑧ What did they do?
 - The dog was on the bed. ⑧ What was on the bed?
- * *Which* replaces nouns when there are more than one involved.
 - Joe, Susie, and Laura went to the beach. ⑧ Which of your friends went to the beach?
 - The brown cat fell out of the tree. ⑧ Which cat fell out of the tree?
- * *When* replaces words or phrases referring to time.
 - I went to bed at 3 o'clock. ⑧ When did you go to bed?
- * *Where* replaces words or phrases referring to place.
 - I put it on the table. ⑧ Where did you put it?
- * *Why* replaces phrases referring to reasons.
 - I didn't do my homework because I was sick. ⑧ Why didn't you do your homework?
- * *How* replaces phrases referring to methods.
 - She rode the bus to school. ⑧ How did she get to school?

9. Pronouns

- * *I, you, he, she, it, we, you, and they* all replace nouns that act as the subject in the sentence.
 - The girls gave the teacher an apple. ⑧ They gave the teacher an apple.
 - The caterpillar is green and wriggly. ⑧ It is green and wriggly.
- * *Me, you, him, her, it, us, you, and them* all replace nouns that act as the object in the sentence.
 - My sister gave Paula the flowers. ⑧ My sister gave her the flowers.
 - Lisa distributed the papers to Luke, Maria, and Henry. ⑧ Lisa distributed the papers to them.
- * *My, your, his, her, its, our, your, and their* all indicate possession.
 - That is **my** book; **Its** hair is straight.
- * *Mine, yours, his, hers, its, ours, yours, and theirs* all indicate possession when no noun follows the pronoun.
 - The book is **hers**; **Theirs** are the dogs with no hair.

10. Some, any, no, every in compound words

- * Use *some* in addition to *thing, body, one*, etc. to form a compound word when you are referring to something indefinite that you know exists.
 - I don't know who, but **someone** took my stapler.
- * Use *any* in addition to *thing, body, one*, etc. to form a compound word when you are referring to something indefinite that you're not sure exists, or that you're indifferent to.

- Is **anything** left of the cake?
- **Anybody** can come to my party.
- * Use *no* in addition to *thing, body, one*, etc. to form a compound word when you are referring to something indefinite that you know, or you think, does not exist, or no longer exists.
 - There is **nothing** there.
 - **Nobody** has the same fingerprints as I do.
- * Use *every* in addition to *thing, body, one*, etc. to form a compound word when you are referring to all things, people, etc.
 - **Everything** in the house was saturated during the flood.
 - That guy seems to know **everybody** in the school.