

# 71 WAYS TO PRACTICE ENGLISH WRITING

**Tips for  
ESL/EFL  
Learners**



**JACKIE BOLEN + JENNIFER BOOKER SMITH**

# **71 Ways to Practice English Writing: Tips for ESL/EFL Learners**

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**Jackie Bolen +  
Jennifer Booker Smith**

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# About the Authors

## Jackie Bolen

I taught English in South Korea for 10 years to every level and type of student. I've taught every age from kindergarten kids to adults. Most of my time has centered around teaching at two universities: five years at a science and engineering school in Cheonan, and four years at a major university in Busan where I taught upper level classes for students majoring in English. In my spare time, you can usually find me outside surfing, biking, hiking, or snowshoeing. I now live in Vancouver, Canada.

In case you were wondering what my academic qualifications are, I hold a Master of Arts in Psychology. During my time in Korea I successfully completed both the Cambridge CELTA and DELTA certification programs. With the combination of almost ten years teaching ESL/EFL learners of all ages and levels, and the more formal teaching qualifications I've obtained, I have a solid foundation on which to offer advice to English learners. I truly hope that you find this book useful. I would love it if you sent me an email with any questions or feedback that you might have.

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## Jennifer Booker Smith

I have a Master of Education in TESOL and have spent fifteen years teaching students of all ages in South Korea, from two-year-old preschoolers to businessmen and even a semester as a teacher trainer at an education university. When I'm not teaching, like Jackie, you can often find me hiking. I've taken up running recently and will soon be running my fourth half marathon. Teaching takes up a lot more "free" time than non-

teachers will ever realize, so it's important to recharge the batteries and being outside is my favorite way to do just that.

You can get in touch with me by emailing [teachtravelllearn@gmail.com](mailto:teachtravelllearn@gmail.com). I'd love to hear from you and help improve your English in any way that I can.



# Motivation and Goal Tips

## Think about your Motivation

The best students I had during my time in Korea were those who had motivation beyond a grade in a class or a score on a TOIEC test. They were learning English because they wanted a job that required it (working for a trading company, flight attendant, fashion designer, etc.), they wanted to go backpacking around the world, or they had some English-speaking cousins or friends, etc.

Anything is better motivation for learning a language than just getting a score on a test! Think about your motivation. What is it? Say it now! Write it down on a piece of paper. Put it on your bedroom wall or bathroom mirror. Remind yourself, when things are difficult, why you are studying English!

## Think about your Goals

Your motivation is why you want to learn English. Your goals are what you want to do in English. Do you want to speak to coworkers in English? Do you need to pass a test for work? Do you want to be accepted to a school or training program? In order to be smart about your language learning, you need SMART goals:

**Specific-** Focus on one single skill; for example, write a 5-paragraph essay in English.

**Measurable-** Have a tool to assess your progress. If there is no way to measure your development, how will you know when you have reached your goal?

**Attainable-** Be realistic. While you should aim high, a goal of 100% writing accuracy is unlikely for most people. Attainable goals are realistic for both your current level and the amount of time and resources you have

to improve your English right now. If you have only one hour to study each week, set lower goals than if you had one hour per day!

**Relevant-** The goals should align with your needs and current language level. Focus on the areas where you are weak. Vocabulary? Grammar? Essay Writing? Informal writing?

**Time-bound-** Your goals need a deadline. Without a deadline, it will be too easy to procrastinate, or put off achieving them until you have more time, energy, the right study partner, etc.

Here are a few questions to ask yourself when you are setting your SMART goals:

1. Who, if anyone, will I study with? Will I work with a tutor, a friend, a conversation group?
2. What materials will I use? Books, apps, videos, pen and paper, etc.
3. When will I study? Before work/school, during breaks, just before bed? Set a specific time of day and days of the week to study.
4. When won't I study? If you don't plan exceptions, you will give yourself a reason to quit. For example, if you have a project to complete for work or school due one week, can you take a week off? A day? If you get sick and take a day or two off, will you make those lessons up later in the week?
5. Where will I study? Do you have a dedicated study or work area at home? If not, think about where you will study. If you will be studying outside of your home, choose a place that is comfortable, has good lighting, and is reasonably quiet. For example, if you will be reading, the library is an obvious choice, but not if you are meeting a speaking partner. Similarly, a coffee shop is a better choice to meet a speaking partner than a noisy bar.
6. Why is this a goal for me? Will it help you communicate with a specific person or group of people? Will it help you meet some requirement for school or work?
7. How will I work towards this goal? This puts together a few of the above elements. For example, "I will write at 5-10 sentences in my journal every

morning before I go to school. I'll write one blog post a week, with a minimum of 200 words. I'll send one email to each of my pen pals once a month."

## **Don't Give Up!**

It's normal to get frustrated when learning. You WILL get frustrated when learning English. We guarantee it! You might feel bored, lonely, confused, tired, etc. Everyone experiences this. The important thing is to not give up. Take a short break for a few hours, or even a day or two. Do something fun that you enjoy. Get some exercise. Eat some healthy food. Take a nap. Talk to a friend or family member. Relax with your pet. Then go back to studying. You'll feel refreshed and ready to keep going. Remember: you are not a robot! People need time to relax. Give your brain a break.

## **Don't be Afraid of Mistakes**

When you're learning something new, you're going to make a lot of mistakes. This is a fact! This is normal for anything and not just English! Remember the very first thing you cooked? It probably wasn't so delicious and it took you a really long time. Maybe your kitchen was a disaster afterwards. How about the first time you shot a basketball? It probably didn't go in!

Learning a language is the same. You're not going to be good at it when you start, but the key is to keep practicing and getting better. But it's hard to practice English writing if you're scared of mistakes. So try to overcome your fear and just write. Of course you'll make lots of mistakes, however, the most important thing is that you keep trying. People won't laugh at you. They'll be kind and try to understand what you're writing even if it's not perfect. You will get better with more practice. Don't give up!

## **Have a Positive Attitude about Criticism**

The people who are best at English are those that have a positive attitude about criticism. When a teacher or peer gives them feedback about

something they wrote, they love it! These people also regularly seek out feedback, and are willing to get it from just about anyone. They realize that they can learn something from a lot of different people. Basically, they want everyone to read their writing and aren't shy about asking!

On the other hand, people who aren't good at English are really shy about sharing their writing with other people. They often feel embarrassed by their lack of writing skill. However, asking for feedback isn't a sign of weakness. Teachers love it when students ask for help! So, be brave and ask people to read what you wrote. Nobody will laugh at you. People will help you improve your writing! Have a positive attitude about criticism and welcome it.

## **Get a Private Tutor**

If you would rather have a dedicated tutor than a language exchange, then there are plenty of online options. Of course, you can get a live tutor, but if you don't mind meeting over Skype, you will have more people to choose from.

Verbling ([www.verbling.com](http://www.verbling.com)) is a popular site. Available tutors are listed with their experience, user rating, hourly rate, location, and schedule. Tutors have self-introduction videos, so you can also hear their accent and rate of speech.

Italki ([www.italki.com](http://www.italki.com)) is a very popular site which offers both professional teachers and community tutors. Teachers are professionals and are expected to have lesson plans and conduct the class according to your individual needs. On the other hand, tutors are native (or near-native) speakers and their lesson is likely to be more like a language exchange, but without spending class time in your native language. Tutors cost much less than teachers, but you get what you pay for. If you are only interested in conversation practice, a tutor could be just what you need at a bargain rate!

On the iTalki platform, English is divided into US and UK. Otherwise, it is very similar to Verbling: teacher/tutor listings have their experience, user rating, hourly rate, schedule, and intro video. One downside of iTalki is the

payment system. All fees are in ITC (iTalki Credits) which are 10 per US dollar, plus a transaction fee each time you buy credits.

## **Find a Language Partner**

An equally motivated language partner is a great way to improve your English skills. The key is to find someone who is as motivated as you are! It's best if you find a partner that does NOT speak your first language so you won't be tempted to chit-chat the whole time! If you do find someone who speaks your first language, make a rule about how much of that language you'll speak during your time together (maybe only 5% or less?).

Also be sure to find someone who wants to focus on improving writing skills. Most students are interested in listening and speaking, but fewer in reading and writing.

If you can't find a language partner in your area, consider finding one online. A site that I recommend is The Mixxer. The BBC lessons with discussion questions for you and your partner are excellent. Easy Language Exchange is also another good one that you can check out. Another, My Language Exchange allows you to browse by location or target language. You can chat by voice, text, or email, and there are lesson plans available, if you need them. For voice or text sessions, the first half of the period is in one language and the second half in the other.

If you would rather use your phone than your computer to study with a language partner, there are apps for that! Tandem has over 1,000,000 users and 15 million monthly chats. There are lots of active users at this site. Hello Talk has similar functions as Tandem, but also allows you to call your language partner (for free) for better sound quality. Bosuu is available as an app and online. If you use the online version, you can record yourself reading the dialogues and listen to the playback. With the Premium membership, you can submit it to the community for evaluation. If you can read this book, the exercises will be a bit basic for you. However, if you don't have regular access to a native speaker or can't afford to hire one, this is a good alternative. It's not free, but at the time of writing, costs €70 per year which is much cheaper than a tutor!

## **iTalki**

Italki is a very popular site which offers both professional teachers and community tutors. Teachers are professionals and are expected to have lesson plans and conduct the class according to your individual needs. On the other hand, tutors are native (or near-native) speakers and their lesson is likely to be more like a language exchange, but without spending class time in your native language. Tutors cost much less than teachers, but you get what you pay for. If you are only interested in conversation practice, a tutor could be just what you need at a bargain rate!

On the iTalki platform, English is divided into US and UK. Otherwise, it is very similar to Verbling: teacher/tutor listings have their experience, user rating, hourly rate, schedule, and intro video.

## **Pay Attention to your Body Clock**

Everyone has a time of day that is best for them. For example, if I have some serious work to do, I'll get up early and work from about 7am to 11am. Then I'll take a break for lunch and some exercise. After that, I can work for a couple more hours in the late afternoon.

What time is best for you? If you're serious about improving your English skills, set aside this time to study. Don't waste it on watching TV, cleaning the house, exercising, or hanging out with friends. You can do that stuff any time!

## **Take Study Breaks**

When you exercise, your muscles get tired. Then you have to take a break. Our brains are the same! When we're studying for a long time, they get tired. Take a brain break every 30 minutes or so. Get up and drink a glass of water. Eat an apple. Say hello to your mom or dog. Go for a walk around the block. Put in a load of laundry. Wash the dishes. Do 20 jumping jacks. Then sit back down and keep studying. You'll feel refreshed and able to study more effectively.

# Writing Tips

## Use the Writing Process

Most of you probably already know this, but it can be helpful to see it written out! When writing, you can use the writing process to help you. You can use this for just about anything.

**Step 1: Prewriting.** Think about what you're going to write. Brainstorm some ideas. Choose the best ideas and make an outline. The outline can be very simple, or very detailed. It depends on you. However, don't write full sentence in the outline. Only make a few notes.

**Step 2: Writing.** Take your ideas and make them into sentences and paragraphs. Don't worry about if it's good, or not. Your first draft will almost always be terrible!

**Step 3: Editing.** Read what you've written slowly and carefully. Does it make sense? Are there any errors. You can repeat steps two and three as often as necessary.

**Step 4: Publishing.** Put your piece of writing on the Internet, hand it in to your teacher, or send the email.

## Dictation Practice

If you've got a study buddy, this is a great activity to switch things up a bit. Take turns dictating and writing short texts. You can either read each text a set number of times or keep repeating it until your partner has written everything. By only repeating the text a set number of times, the listener/writer must work faster and (possibly) make some guesses about what information or words should be there.

If you don't have a study buddy, my favorite site is Breaking News English ([www.breakingnewsenglish.com](http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com)). Not only are you given a choice of accents, but you are also given a choice of listening speeds. The transcript

and comprehension activities let you check your work. The dictation activity gives you the text in very short segments (with hints if you need them) which can be good for starting out. Over time though, it would be more useful to work with longer clips—just like listening in real life.

## **Copy Native Writing**

Copying in this case does not mean plagiarizing or stealing another writer's work and claiming it is your own. In this case, it means finding a text that is at your reading level and copying it. Choose a text of the same type which you would like to write better. For example, if you need to write a test essay, practice with example essays. If you need to write business emails, practice with those. You can easily find books of samples of all types of writing. If you just want to improve your writing in general, you can choose fiction, newspapers, blogs, or whatever interests you.

Do not do this while watching a video or listening to the radio. Really pay attention to the text. Why do you think the author chose that noun/verb/adjective, rather than a synonym? Why is that article (a, an, or the) the best choice? By mindfully copying native writing, you will start to feel what is correct or what a native would write.

It is important to choose texts which you really understand for this activity. In normal reading, you may try to push yourself with texts more advanced than your level, but this is about pushing your writing to the next level. It is also important to write the texts you are copying, rather than type them. Studies have shown that writing is better than typing for learning.

## **Write Every Day**

You don't have to spend a lot of time each day. If you focus your efforts, just a brief period of writing each day will do you a lot more good than sitting down once a week to practice writing a long essay. A little bit of effort often is more helpful than a long period of studying once a week (or month!)

Make writing a daily habit.



## **Use English Whenever You Can**

This is one easy way to sneak more English writing into your daily life. If you are making a grocery list or a to-do list, write it in English. If you are texting a friend who also studies English, use English!

## **Understand Formal vs. Informal English**

People who use English as a second or third language sometimes don't understand the difference between formal and informal language. Formal language is what you use in a business meeting, presentation, when writing a report, or when speaking to your boss or professor. Formal language doesn't use slang, idioms, or contractions. Formal grammar and vocabulary can be quite complicated and/or specialized. Depending on your job, you might never have to use formal language! But, it's what you often learn in textbooks.

Informal language is what you use when speaking to your friends, classmates, or family. You'd probably write informally in a blog post, or in a text message to a friend. It includes slang, idioms, contractions, and simple grammar and vocabulary. This is what you need to use almost all of the time. You'll sound quite strange if you use formal language in situations where it's not necessary. Our advice is to watch some TV and movies. They use mostly informal language. You can learn some slang or idioms, and hear how people talk in normal life. Imitate them and you'll sound like a natural in no time.

Always keep informal vs. formal in the back of your mind when writing. This will help you know what kind of language, grammar and style you need to use.

## **Practice Paraphrasing**

Paraphrasing is an important writing skill. If you are planning to take a test such as the TOEFL, TOEIC, or IELTS, you will need to be able to paraphrase effectively. Paraphrasing uses your words to state the main

points of a text without adding any information, such as your opinion or previous knowledge of the topic.

To practice paraphrasing, choose a short newspaper article. Begin by circling words which cannot be changed: places, names, dates, etc. Then, see if any information can be combined or rearranged. Next, consider the best synonyms to replace the nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Finally, reread the original text and compare it with your paraphrase. Do both texts have the same meaning? If not, keep trying.

This is an excellent activity to do with a study buddy. You will probably each have different ideas about how to restate information. So the two of you can discuss which vocabulary word is best, as well as different ways to arrange the text. Alternatively, you could each paraphrase the text by yourself, and then compare the results and discuss.

## **Tips for Writing an Email**

Email is quite a specific form of communication that has a few unwritten rules. If you follow them, the emails you send will be effective. If you don't, people probably won't read them!

The first tip is to keep emails brief, and direct. People get a lot of emails, especially at work. Make sure your emails are to the point! Make them very clear and easy to understand. Use simple grammar and vocabulary. The tone of your email should be polite, and not demanding.

Next, make sure you have a good subject line. By "good," we mean that it describes exactly what the email is about. For example, saying something like, "Hello friend," when your email is about an upcoming work meeting is bad! A better subject line would be, "Team A lunch meeting Jan. 2, 12:00."

Finally, don't forget to proofread. Read your email out loud at least once, checking for things like basic grammatical errors, spelling, etc.

Ready? Practice writing some emails. Give yourself a reason to write (an upcoming work meeting, a party you are hosting, a complaint about a product to a company) and then get started.

## Use a Picture

If you aren't sure what to write about, use a picture. This can be a photo you have taken, one from the internet or newspaper, or a work of art. You can use it for descriptive writing or as a prompt for creative writing. Try to include as many senses as you can—see, feel, hear, smell, even taste. Some questions to get you started:

What can you see in the picture?

Are there people? What are they doing? Look at their faces. How do they feel? Happy, sad, angry. . .

What is the setting? In a house, at a beach, on a city street. . .

How is the weather?

What is happening? If you don't know, get creative!

## Start Journalling

If you're not in the habit of journalling, it can be a little bit difficult at the beginning. But, start slowly with 4 or 5 sentences per day. You can gradually increase the sentences to 10 or more. Then just keep doing it at least 4 or 5 days a week. Writing every day is best. It gets easier over time and your writing and speaking will both improve.

If you want someone to correct your writing, check out Lang-8 ([www.lang-8.com](http://www.lang-8.com)). This is a community of native speakers and language learners who correct each other's writing. The catch is, you have to correct someone's writing before you get your writing corrected. The more you help others, the more help you can receive.

## Describe a Scene

One problem with practicing writing is that it is often difficult to think of a topic. Many people keep a journal, but if every day you write about the same activities and experiences, you will not improve. This is one idea

which will give you endless material to write. Sources of scenes to describe include photos, paintings, TV, and movies.

You can simply describe what you see (or picture in your mind, if describing a scene from a book or creating an imaginary scene). To describe a scene from a TV or movie, imagine you are explaining it to a blind person. If you want more of a challenge, write a story based on a photo or painting. Ask yourself:

Who are the people?

What are they doing?

What emotions are they feeling?

Add sensory details about the sights, sounds, smells, etc. you can see or imagine from the image.

## **Fill out an Application Form**

During a teacher training course, my tutor mentioned that “writing” is not only writing essays. He said that we can get our students to practice writing just about anything and it would be useful. That comment changed my outlook on teaching writing, especially to beginners. If you’re a lower-level student, don’t worry about writing 5-paragraph academic essays. This will be too difficult for you. Instead, focus on things that you CAN do.

One simple thing that beginners can do is fill out an application form for a job. To find an application form, Google “sample job application form USA.” Here’s one example:

<http://www.careerchoices.com/lounge/files/jobapplication.pdf>. Filling out an application form is a very practical activity. You will have to fill one out if you want to get a job, visa, or when traveling.

Then, print it off and fill it out. Look up anything you don’t know in your dictionary. Ask your teacher if they’d be willing to quickly look at it once you’re done and let you know if you made any big mistakes. Then, fill out a different form. For example, a customs form for traveling, or a visa application form.

## **Take a Writing Class**

I taught academic writing to students majoring in English for many years in South Korea. At the beginning of the class, most students didn't even the basics of writing an essay. This wasn't their fault though! They had never even written an essay in Korean! They didn't know what things like thesis statements, hooks, topic sentence and supporting facts were. So, I taught them!

By the end of the course, almost all the students could write a decent essay with the correct structure. Of course, some students used higher level grammar, and vocabulary. Other students wrote quite simply. It didn't really matter though. I wasn't worried about that. The point is that taking an English writing class can really help you, no matter what level you are at!

## **Summarize with the Text**

An easy way to practice writing is to summarize what you read. You can read a short newspaper, magazine article, or a chapter in a book. Then with the article or book in front of you, write down in a few sentences what it was about. For a short article, two or three sentences is good. For a chapter in a book, you might need four or five sentences. Make this a habit every single time you read something and you'll soon be an expert in summarizing!

## **Summarize without the Text**

Similar to the last tip, you can summarize anything you read. It's also a great idea to do with anything that you listen to, such as a podcast. This time, do it without the text in front of you. Read something, put it away and then summarize it in 3-5 sentences. If you do this with listening, listen 1,2, or 3 times until you understand the main ideas. Then, stop listening and write!

## **Copy Style and Structure**

The style and structure of your writing will really depend on the purpose of it. For example, a 5-paragraph academic essay will look very different than a thank you card. Or, compare a resume, to a cover letter, to a poem. They are obviously very different!

You need to consider the genre of writing. Follow the standards for that genre. You can look them up on the Internet. For example, “Sample resume,” or, “Sample thank you note,” or, “Sample 5 paragraph essay.” You could also ask your teacher for some help with this.

Don’t copy the sample from the Internet or your teacher word for word. That is stealing! What you can do is copy the structure. For example, a thank you card has a standard structure. Opening, thanking the person for doing something, closing. This will get you going in the right direction. Even if your grammar and vocabulary aren’t perfect, *at least* it will look and feel correct!

## **Write Concisely**

When you write in some languages, such as Korean, the longer the sentences the better! Sentences are very complicated, and sometimes even quite difficult for a native speaker to fully understand them sometimes. When students try to translate these sentence directly into English, the results are often not good!

Simple English can be beautiful. You don’t have to use long, complicated sentences. It’s usually better to write concisely. This means that you say what you need to say in as few words as possible. This is especially true if you are a beginner. It’s better to make short, simple, but perfect sentences rather than long, complicated sentences with many grammatical errors. Think simple. Think short. This will help readers be able to understand what you’re writing quickly and easily.

## **Practice Writing Fluently**

For speaking and writing, there are two main ways to evaluate it: fluency and accuracy. Fluency is how fast you are able to do it. Accuracy is how

good your grammar and vocabulary are. It's more complicated than that, but that's the simple explanation!

Most English writing classes and textbooks focus on accuracy. It's much easier for a book, or teacher to point out grammar and vocab errors than to teach you to write quickly. However, it's important to work on both. The good news is that you can easily do it yourself! Here's how I helped my students with fluency.

Get a notebook. Use it only for this. Each day (or whatever time interval you decide), give yourself a topic. For example, "My family," or, "Plans for the weekend," or, "Hopes for the future," or, "My favourite book." Then write about that topic for 5 minutes (or 10 once you get used to it). Put away your cell-phone and dictionary. The goal is to write quickly. Use only grammar and vocabulary that you know. If you don't know how to spell something, just guess. It doesn't matter.

This is the most important thing- your pen should NEVER stop moving. If you can't think of anything, write this sentence, "I don't know what to write. I don't know what to write. I don't..." After two or three times, you'll think of something else! Make sure your pen does not stop moving!

Over time, you'll notice that the amount you write increases! Remember that the goal is to write more quickly, not to write accurately. You can work on grammar, vocabulary and structure at other times.

## **Outlines are your Friend!**

Often, when people sit down to write something, they look at the blank page or screen and don't know what to say. This is where outlining comes to the rescue. Before you begin writing, take a few minutes to organize your thoughts. Whether you are writing an essay for a test, an email for work, or a journal, prewriting can save you time.

An outline is very simply a plan for a piece of writing. If you like, you can start with a mind map, then take those ideas and list them. Once you have your list of points to make, add details to each point. Once you have all of

the points you need or want to make, you can start writing in complete sentences and paragraphs.

## **ALWAYS Proofread**

Not proofreading your writing is the biggest mistake you can make. This applies to students who are studying English as a second or third language, as well as native speakers. For this book, each author read it three times, looking for any spelling or grammatical errors. *Then*, we got an editor to do the same thing for us! After that, we both read it again. Each time, we found mistakes. Hopefully, it's perfect now!

After you write, allow yourself some time to read your work. If you're doing a writing test that is one hour long, I recommend the following:

**5 minutes planning.** Write a few notes. Make a plan. What is your first, second, and third main point?

**45-50 minutes writing.**

**5-10 minutes proofreading.** Check your writing for any mistakes. I recommend double-spacing, so it's easy to make any changes if you need to. Cross off what you wrote and then write in the line above it.

Reading out loud is a good habit to get into. Read slowly, each and every single word. Pay close attention to things like subject-verb agreement (He is, She goes), spelling, capital letters, punctuation, etc.

If you do only one thing to improve your writing, it's this! ALWAYS proofread. Always! Here's a proofreading checklist I made for my university students in South Korea: [www.jackiebolen.com/proofreading](http://www.jackiebolen.com/proofreading).

## **Read your Writing out Loud**

One of the best ways to check your writing is to read it out loud. This is something that authors and bloggers do all the time. It can really help you as well! You'll be able to find awkward sentences that are too long. It's easier to hear basic grammatical errors than it is to see them sometimes.



You can find the spots where you pause, which often means that you should insert a comma, or make a new sentence.

## **Pay Attention to Spelling**

You may not think that paying attention to spelling is important. We have computers and programs that run spell checks. However, you won't always be using a computer when writing, and nothing looks more terrible than writing filled with basic spelling mistakes. If there are these basic mistakes, it doesn't actually matter what you write, or how good your grammar is. People probably won't read it, or if they read it, they won't take you seriously. Next time you have a spelling test in English class, take it seriously. It is important!

## **Your First Draft Will Always be Terrible**

Professional authors, and writers NEVER think that their first draft of something will be a masterpiece. It's usually far from this and is often pretty terrible. There are many mistakes. There might be faulty logic. The writing can sound awkward. However, this doesn't matter! The important thing is that they wrote something, and with editing, they can improve it.

If you don't write *something*, you'll never be able to improve it! When you're writing, even if you don't feel 100% confident in what you're writing, keep writing. Don't stop! You can always make it better. Nobody writes very well the first time around, so don't worry about it.

## **Use the Active, Instead of Passive Voice**

Check out these two sentences:

The dog bit the woman.

The woman was bitten by the dog.

The first sentence is active, while the second is passive. Normally, you should use the active voice when writing. During my time teaching writing

in South Korean universities, FAR too many students used the passive voice and it made their writing not as good as it could have been.

To search for the passive voice, you can use this website:  
<http://www.aztekera.com/tools/tobeverbs.php> (Aztekera). You can copy and paste your text, and then it will show you where you've used the passive voice.

## **Don't Name the Subject**

On the other hand, there are a couple reasons why you might want to use the passive voice. The first reason is if you're a scientist and you're writing a report. The emphasis is on the results of the experiment, not the person who did it. For example, "It was found that solution ABC..."

Going along with this, any time you want to emphasize the result, and not the person who caused it, you can use the passive voice. For example, you might not know who did something. "The paintings in the cave were made in the late stone age." Other times, the subject may be vague, such as "they" or "people" (as in, "They say. . ." or "Lots of people think. . ."). This is fine for casual or spoken English, but we try to avoid using these phrases in writing.

In this case, we use the subject "it" and avoid naming the subject. For example:

They say we will soon be riding in driverless cars. >>> It has been/is said we will soon be riding in driverless cars.

People think he is a jerk. >>> It is thought that he is a jerk.

Some other commonly used reporting verbs include: accept, admit, agree, argue, believe, claim, decide, discover, feel, find, know, predict, recommend, report, and understand, among many others.

Read the following example paragraph, then write your own, using it+reporting verbs to retell some recent news.

It has been reported that Disneyland and Disney World are each building a Star Wars-themed park. The new parks are rumored to be opening next year. However, it is not known if both attractions will open at the same time. In any case, it is expected that more Star Wars fans will be visiting Disneyland and Disney World once the new themed attractions are open.

## **Short Writing Activities for Beginners**

If you are a beginner at writing in English, or just want to review the basics, then check out this list:

[http://esl.fis.edu/learners/writing/misc/index\\_color.htm](http://esl.fis.edu/learners/writing/misc/index_color.htm)

There are 72 simple exercises. Use the “checklist” to keep track of which ones you have done.

## **Stickyball.net**

Similar to the website mentioned above, Stickyball.net has a lot of resources for beginner writers. Check out this link:

<http://www.stickyball.net/esl-writing-exercises-and-activities.html>. They are mostly for beginners, but could be a good way to review the basics such as error correction and sentence patterns.

## **BBC Skillswise**

There are some excellent activities for English learners at this website. Here is the link to the writing ones: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/topic-group/writing>. They are a bit more advanced level than the previous websites mentioned and cover things like formatting and style, writing a letter and handwriting.

## **Learn How to Use Punctuation, Including Quotes**

Students usually hate practicing punctuation. It's so boring! I don't blame you. I think it's boring to study, too. Unfortunately, if you use incorrect

punctuation, you will distract your reader or even change the meaning of what you have written. There are numerous online resources to help you with punctuation. Google, “ESL punctuation practice worksheet” and you'll find enough to study for weeks!

## **Translate Something**

Translating is often seen as kind of a dirty word in language learning (unless it is your intended career), but once you reach intermediate fluency, it can actually be useful. By this stage, you are probably pretty good at getting your point across on a variety of topics. However, you may find yourself becoming complacent. Since you can get your point across, you may not be as motivated to increase your vocabulary or use more complex grammatical structures. This is where translation can take your writing to the next level.

When translating, you need to take the nuance of the original text into account. You aren't simply stating your ideas or opinions. You must choose the words which express the original meaning.

If you haven't used translating as a writing exercise, try this:

Choose a short article you find interesting or which uses vocabulary you want to learn.

Read the article carefully and make a note of important words. Do not just start with the first word and translate through to the end.

To start, just use those key words and phrases to recreate the article. As you practice more, you can work on being more exact.

Have a tutor correct your work or use a website like Lang-8 to get feedback from a native speaker.

Rewrite the corrected translation in a notebook.

A bonus of using Lang-8 is that when you correct others' translations you will still need to think about how the meaning of the original text is expressed. It's easier when translating into your own language, but still

requires you to focus on the language. A benefit of Lang-8 over using a tutor or friend is that you can get corrections and feedback from multiple people. Evaluate the feedback you receive to improve your writing—make note of grammar corrections and synonyms and study the difference in meaning and/or usage.

Lang-8 pro tip: when you receive really useful feedback, thank the person with a star and send them a friend request. When you upload a new post, it goes to the top of your friends' feeds. Stars help users' texts move up the queue faster, so if you give stars you help those who have helped you and they are more likely to help you again.

## **But, Don't Translate Word for Word**

I taught in South Korean universities for about 10 years. The best students were the ones who thought, talked, and wrote in English only. The weakest students were those that translated word for word between English and their first language. When you're listening, don't translate every single word into your first language. Listen to an entire sentence, or paragraph and then translate the main ideas, if necessary. Translating word for word is only helpful to remind you of how the same meaning is expressed differently between English and your first language.

## **Play the Devil's Advocate**

Is there an issue you feel strongly about? For example, abortion, gay marriage, or whether or not a country should have the death penalty? Write a short persuasive essay supporting your opinion. The goal of a persuasive essay is to make it convincing.

After you've done that, play the devil's advocate. This means to take the opposite view on an issue. Write a second essay supporting the other side. Good writers are able to use reason and logic to support any side of an issue, even if they don't personally believe it.

## **Teach Someone How to Do Something**

I'm sure you've read an instruction manual before. The manual is basically teaching you how to do something, step by step. Think about something that you know how to do well. Maybe it's kicking soccer ball, playing the guitar, frying an egg, or upgrading your computer. Pretend that you're writing an instruction manual, with the goal to teach people how to do it. Make sure it's easy to understand and simple enough for even a child to understand!

## **Practice Hooks**

When you write, you need to grab the reader's attention from the very first sentence. Take a look at the first sentence of a magazine or news article, a novel, or a famous essay. If it's good, it makes you want to keep reading! You can practice writing some of your own. You can write the first sentence for a fiction story, newspaper article, or essay. Get creative and have some fun. Ask your friends or teacher which ones are most interesting.

## **Your Life Story**

It can be good practice to write your life story. This will require you to write using past tense verbs almost entirely. If you need a quick review of past tense verbs, you can check this out (<http://www.englishpage.com/verbpage/simplepast.html>). For your story, you can start at the very beginning, and go up to the present time, talking about the highlights. Or, you can focus on a specific period in time such as middle school. Another way to write about the past is choose an interesting story, and write specifically about that. Just remember to pay special attention to the verbs!

## **Your Hopes for the Future**

It can also be good practice to write about the future. This will require you to use future tense verbs. If you're a little unsure about when to use a certain future verb tense, give yourself a quick test (<http://www.englishlessonsbrighton.co.uk/future-tenses-exercise/>) and see how you do! Once you have the basics of the future tense down, write about

your hopes for the future. You can answer the question, “Where do you see yourself in 10 years?”

## **Regrets About the Past**

If you want to practice a more advanced tense, write about your regrets about the past. If you want to know the grammatical term, it is third conditional. These include could have, would have, and should have+ past participle. For example: If I had saved my spending money, I could have gone to Bali for my vacation.

## **Add Details By Making Comparisons**

You may have noticed that a number of the tips here include adding details: information about a point you are trying to make, using the five senses, etc. Comparisons are yet another type of detail. These include metaphors and similes. Metaphors call one thing another. For example, calling a sneaky person a snake. Similes compare two things using like or as. For example, saying a speedy runner is as fast as a horse.

Other words to use to compare two things include: just, much as, the way (that), as if, and as though. Like can also be used to compare two things in a way that is not considered a simile. Examples of these comparisons are:

If he doesn’t study more, he will fail, just as he did last year.

Some tribes in South America live much as their ancestors did hundreds of years ago.

I clean my house the way my mother taught me.

He looked at her as if she had hit him.

She blinked, as though she couldn’t believe her eyes.

How can you live like this?!

To practice, rewrite an essay or journal entry adding at least three details using these words and phrases.

# Essays, and other Formal Writing Tips

## Essay Frames

If you are preparing for an English test, such as TOEFL, TOEIC, or IELTS, you will need to practice writing essay. Fortunately, there is a fairly standard format of five paragraphs which you will be expected to use. The five paragraphs usually consist of:

### **Introduction:**

A thesis sentence which states your position on the topic. A brief introduction of each point you will discuss in paragraphs 2-4. A transition sentence leading to the body of the essay.

### **Body:**

This is usually three paragraphs each consisting of a topic sentence introducing the point to be discussed, two to three details or examples to support your point, and a transition sentence leading to the next paragraph.

### **Conclusion:**

A sentence restating your thesis in different words. A sentence or two summarizing your points. A final thought.

Check out this essay organizer handout that I used to give my students in South Korea. It will help you see visually how you should organize a 5-paragraph, academic essay. Get the PDF here: [www.jackiebolen.com/essay](http://www.jackiebolen.com/essay).

If you need some ideas of what to write about, check out what my students in Korea have to write about for their midterm and final exam. One type of essay is an argument essay, and the other is a comparison essay. There are around 15 ideas for each kind of essay. Choose a few of them and write! Get the PDFs here: [www.jackiebolen.com/topics](http://www.jackiebolen.com/topics).

## Think about your Supporting Ideas



When writing essays, take time to save time. That is, before you begin writing, make a list of about five to eight supporting ideas. If you have to choose sides, make a list for each side. Then, choose the side which is easier to write about. In any type of essay, though, you need to organize your supporting ideas before you begin writing. If you don't, you are likely to just write a disorganized list of details.

Once you have your list of points, you should rank them. Your essay should begin with the strongest supporting idea. You also want each supporting idea to lead to the next in a logical way. So, after choosing the strongest point, consider which of your other points would be easy to connect with one another.

The third step in pre-writing the supporting ideas is to list several points to give more details about each. The acronym PIE is used for this stage: Point, Information, Example. The Point is your topic sentence. Information is what you know which shows your point is valid. Then, end with an Example to support your information. Try to fully explain your position as clearly as possible.

## **Avoid Being too General**

When writing, it's better to be specific, rather than too general. For example, if you're writing an academic essay and you say something like, "A long time ago..." it means nothing! Tell us how long ago. Was it a hundred years ago, or a thousands years ago?

Another example of where you can be too general is when you're giving facts and examples to support what you say. Instead of saying, "Almost everyone in Canada is in support of gay marriage," you could say, "From a poll done in 2015, 92% of Canadians are in favour of gay marriage." Give more details in your writing and it will be far more convincing. Give evidence. Explain what you say. Use logic and reason.

## **Paragraph Structure**

As with essays, most paragraphs follow a similar structure with a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning is a topic sentence telling the reader what the paragraph is about. The middle is the information. The end is either a conclusion or a transition to the next paragraph. Fiction writing may not follow this pattern, but most other writing will. This really just requires a little bit of planning and makes your writing much easier for the reader to understand.

# **Fun With English Writing**

## **Write in Forums**

No matter what your hobbies or interests are, there are online forums for people with the same interests. Search for some English-language groups focused on topics you are interested in. Simply Google (topic)+forum. If the results are in your own language, make sure you are on google.com, rather than your home country. Posts should be related to the group topic, so you are more likely to know or want to know the vocabulary. Posts are also usually quite short, so you won't get overwhelmed by a wall of text. You also shouldn't feel pressure to write a long post.

## **Write in Facebook Groups**

If you would rather use Facebook than join another website, don't worry; there are thousands of groups for every interest you can imagine. You may need to change your Facebook language to English to get the search results you want. As on forums, Facebook posts are usually short, so you won't feel pressure to write a lot. You don't even have to write anything at all until you feel comfortable participating.

## **Write on Twitter**

Twitter is a fun way to practice English writing. Sign-up for a free account and follow some people. Hopefully they will follow you back. You can search for something like, "ESL," or "learn English" to find other English learners like yourself.

## **Get a Pen Pal**

You might prefer to develop a relationship with one person rather than interact in a forum or a Facebook group or hope someone marks your writing on Lang-8. A pen pal is a great solution if you don't have access to a native speaker or study buddy locally. In the past, pen pals had to wait for their mail to reach one another, but email is instant. Some pen pal sites let you choose email or post (snail mail).

Sites like Pen Pal World and Global Penfriends let you search for pen pals all over the world. This is a bit different than the other suggestions, because you will just be writing to one another socially. Your pen pal will not be a tutor, study buddy, or language exchange partner. You improve your writing as you communicate with your pen pal who may or may not be a native English speaker. On the other hand, InterPals is a site just for language learners looking for language exchange partners. You enter which language you speak and which language you want to study.

## **Start a Blog**

One way that you can improve your writing and speaking is to start a blog. You can share your ideas, thoughts and daily life with the world. Some of the best free platforms include Blogger, Wordpress and Tumblr.

Share what you post with your friends and family on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest or other social media channels. Encourage people to comment with their own thoughts.

You can also record some short videos and post them on your blog. You'll get better at speaking by practicing speaking, but you'll also get better at writing by preparing an outline (or full script) for your video! I used to teach university students in South Korea and I assigned videos to my students for homework. Many of the students didn't like it at the time because they were shy. However, at the end of the course, they said it was one of the most useful things they did. So don't be shy; put your words and your voice out in the world for people to hear.

## **Plan a Trip**

Next time you're going on vacation, plan it in English! Instead of researching in your first language, use Google in English. Read only English information. Book hotels, planes, etc. only in English (only do this if you are at an intermediate level or higher to not make mistakes!). In order to practice writing, keep notes only in English. Here's an example of how you might plan your trip using English. You can add as little, or as much detail as you'd like.

### **Day 1: Monday, January 1**

Fly from Seoul (3pm)——> Vancouver (7am)

Check into Hotel ABC, on 123 Avenue

Rest and relax!

### **Day 2: Tuesday, January 2**

Stay at Hotel ABC

Tour around Stanley Park

Eat at Pub XYZ for dinner

**Day 3: Wednesday, January 3**

Check out of Hotel ABC

Rent a car from Budget 123

Drive to Whistler

Rent skis from shop ABC

Go Skiing all day

Check into Hotel ABC in Whistler

Go to bed early!

## **Write a Short Story**

For something different, try writing a short fiction story. Think of an idea and start writing! You can write a story for children, teens, or adults. Let your creativity take over. Remember to build some suspense, and of course, include a good hook at the beginning so that people will want to keep reading it. Don't worry so much about following any certain writing style, or structure. There's a lot of freedom when writing a fiction story.

To make it more interesting, don't use boring words. Check out this handout I give my students filled with descriptive words: [www.jackiebolen/words](http://www.jackiebolen/words).

# Reading and Listening Tips

## Extensive Reading

The best English writers are those that can read fluently. Extensive reading is an excellent way to learn a language the natural way. Extensive reading means reading for enjoyment and to develop general reading skills. It can be compared with intensive reading, which means reading in detail with specific learning aims and tasks.

Extensive reading helps you see how grammar and vocabulary are used in the real world. You'll see all the stuff you've probably learned from a textbook in a natural context. Keep in mind two things: you should choose something at a slightly lower level, so you're able to read for pleasure, and you shouldn't stop and get out the dictionary every two seconds. This will make you way too frustrated and you'll probably give up!

I always suggest to my students that they start with teen fiction. The stories are quite interesting (I like reading them too!) and the language is less difficult. Once you've mastered that genre, it's time to start reading more difficult stuff like in-depth magazine articles, or adult fiction.

Some suggestions in the teen fiction genre you might enjoy are:

The Hunger Games Series

The Twilight Series

The Harry Potter Series

His Dark Materials Series

A Wrinkle in Time

Charlotte's Web

The Giver

To Kill a Mockingbird

The Anne of Green Gables Series

The Chronicles of Narnia

## **Read English Newspapers and Magazines**

It might seem a little bit strange that reading can help you with writing, but studies have shown that doing extensive reading benefits all the other skills too. This means that by reading a lot, you'll improve your speaking, writing, listening, grammar and vocabulary. It's awesome!

Although you should challenge yourself once in awhile with something very difficult, it's best to read mostly easy things. English newspapers are often easy enough for English as a second language learners to understand. Magazines are often a bit more difficult.

## **Listen to English Songs**

Improving your listening skills can help you with writing! It may seem a bit odd, but studies have shown that all four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) are interconnected. If you get better at one of them, the other ones will also improve. Extensive listening is an excellent way to improve your writing skills. Extensive listening means listening to a broad range of things for pleasure. Choose something that is at a bit lower level than you are at. This means that you'll be able to understand at least 80% of it. By doing this, you'll start to understand how English is used in the real world. And of course, this will help you with writing!

One way to improve your listening skills is to listen to English music. Instead of listening to music in your own language, check out English music. If you don't understand what they're saying, look online and find the lyrics. Lots of YouTube videos have songs with lyrics. Sing along if you can and don't be shy! I recommend the following online radio stations:

**Soma FM:** Choose your genre and listen! *Lush* and *Folk Forward* are good ones for understanding the lyrics.



[iTunes](#): They have many radio stations. Just find one you like! Apple is currently charging a subscription fee, so it may not be your first choice.

[Pandora](#): Create your own ultimate music mix based on your preferences.

[iHeartRadio](#): They are also free, and have music as well as podcasts.

## **Listen to Podcasts**

I love podcasts! They are entertaining, informative and you can learn something new. There is a podcast for just about any topic you can imagine. The best place to find them is in the iTunes store. They're also usually (99% of the time) free! It's amazing. Some of the ones I recommend for English learners are:

[Serial](#) (Advanced). This is the most popular podcast in history. The story is extremely compelling and it's hard to stop listening. Season one is far more interesting than season two!

[The British Council](#) (Beginner-advanced). Search on iTunes or the British Council Website for their podcasts. They have a wide variety for all levels.

[Podcasts in English](#) (Beginner-advanced). A nice variety of podcast for English learners. It's well organized by level.

[Radiolab](#) (Intermediate). General interest stories about a certain theme.

[Slow English](#). Each episode discusses one aspect of life in Australia. The website has a transcript and vocab list to accompany each episode. Listen once (or two or three times) without the transcript, then check your comprehension.

## **Watch English TV or Movies (no Subtitles)**

You likely already watch English TV or movies, but you probably do them with subtitles in your own language. This does not provide you with the maximum benefits! It's better if you watch without subtitles! This is

because your brain will be forced to work much harder. When choosing a TV show or film, there are several points to consider:

**What you're interested in.** You can find lists of “Best Movies to Learn English” all over the internet, but if the films are in genres you don’t like, you are less likely to get as much out of it. Is it something you could watch over and over? Unless your English is advanced, you will learn more each time you watch the same show. So, pick something you will enjoy re-watching as much as you enjoyed watching for the first time.

**Speaking Styles.** Some styles are easier to understand than others. For example, Tom Hanks speaks slowly and clearly, but Sylvester Stallone sounds tired or a little drunk and is more difficult to understand.

**Genre.** Action movies will be easier to understand, because you can use the visual cues (the action) help you understand. Dramas and romantic comedies will have more “sitting and talking” scenes and more difficult language.

You can take watching TV or movies to the next level by studying the transcripts. There is a large selection of movie scripts available to read online for free at IMSDB and TV scripts at Forever Dreaming ([www.foreverdreaming.org](http://www.foreverdreaming.org)). This is a fan-created site with a large collection of Friends scripts.

I think watching a series is better than a movie, and watching reality TV is the best. The reason for this is you can get used to the characters’ accents and speech, which makes comprehension easier. With reality TV, you can also hear how people really talk. A quick word of warning! Don’t start pulling people’s hair and throwing things when you are angry—not everything you see on reality TV is true!

If you watch episodes on YouTube, you can turn on the subtitles. Keep in mind that the subtitles aren’t always accurate. Challenge yourself to watch carefully and catch the mistakes. This will help you listen actively, even when there are no comprehension activities to complete.

There are several writing activities you can do using TV, movies, podcasts, and TED talks. One is to summarize what you have seen. This can be very

brief, like a TV or movie listing, with only the main points. You could also write a more detailed summary of several hundred words. A third activity would be a viewer response—give a brief summary and also include your opinions, such as the following questions for TV or movies:

What was your favorite scene?

Were there any plot holes? (Plot holes are parts of the story that don't make sense.)

Were any story lines left unfinished?

Who was your favorite character? Why?

After watching or listening to a podcast, TED talk, news story or documentary, etc. you could ask yourself questions such as these:

What was the gist of this? (“Gist” means the main idea or main points.)

Did the speaker have a clear opinion about the topic? If so, what was it?

Do you have any questions about this topic?

If you do have remaining questions, you could research the topic and write a summary of the results.

## **Check out TED Talks**

TED Talks ([www.tedtalks.com](http://www.tedtalks.com)) is an amazing resource for learning how to write formally in English! They have thousands of speeches on a huge variety of topics. The people giving the speeches are experts in their fields. The speeches range in length from a couple of minutes to close to an hour. For advanced students, listen without subtitles. For beginner or intermediates, take advantage of the subtitles or transcripts. This website makes practicing listening easy and interesting! Then, once you understand the structure of speeches, and the grammar and vocabulary used in them, you'll be able to go and write your own more easily. Here are some questions you can ask yourself after listening:

What is the main idea? What is the speaker's thesis?

How does this talk relate to my life?

Does the speaker give a “call to action”? (Are you asked to do something after listening?)

How does the talk relate to my existing beliefs? Am I challenged to think about something differently? If so, what?

Did the speaker use facts and logic, or emotional appeals?

What is my opinion on this topic? Did it change as a result of this TED Talk?

# Grammar and Vocabulary Tips

## Study Language “Chunks”

If you really want to become fluent in speaking or writing in English, you need to have a core of multi-word chunks that are easy for you to remember. The key is to get your brain to automatically think of them together. Some examples of chunks are:

**Collocations:** I want to buy two BARS OF SOAP please.

**Phrasal verbs:** Blow up, break down, catch up.

**Idioms:** It's raining cats and dogs.

**Sentence frames:** Whales HAVE lungs, BUT fish HAVE gills.

**Sentence starters:** The first thing that happened was ... After that, ....  
Finally, ...

**Conversational routines:** A: Thank you. B: You're welcome.

Consider this sentence: “I left my book on the desk.” There are three chunks of information: I left, my book, on the desk. Each chunk has one piece of information. So, longer subjects and phrasal verbs would be considered separate chunks. Pauses in your speech should occur between chunks. In order for these things to become automatic, you need targeted practice. Study some of these things and then use them! Use them in writing. Use them when speaking. Keep your eyes open for them when reading. Keep your ears open for them when listening.

It can be helpful to focus on one of these areas of language for a period of time, then focus on another. For example, spend a month or two studying collocations (words that are frequently used together). Then spend the next month or two focusing on phrasal verbs (two-three word verbs). Combine the new language with the previous language so you don't forget what you have already learned. For example, “My son *tore up* ten PIECES OF PAPER and made a huge mess.”

For some more information, as well as practice with phrasal verbs, check out our worksheet: [www.jackiebolen.com/verbs](http://www.jackiebolen.com/verbs).

## **Remember that English is a Strange Language**

There *are* patterns in English grammar, but there are also many exceptions. A few examples:

Read (sounds like “reed”)- present tense

Read (sounds like “red”)- past tense

House- plural = houses

Mouse- plural = mice

Just remember: don’t get obsessed with all the exceptions! Focus on the rules and patterns first. You can learn about the exceptions later.

## **Keep Up With Your Vocabulary Studies**

Of course, you need to know words to write (or speak), but if you are studying for a writing test, part of your marks will be on your use of vocabulary beyond simply being able to express yourself. Even if you aren’t studying for a test, English may have many words which seem to have the same meaning, but actually have small differences. The more you read and study examples of writing, the more you will naturally choose the correct words.

If you are working to improve your writing for a specific purpose, then study related vocabulary. Most tests, like IELTS and TOEIC, have common categories of writing topics. Make an effort to increase your vocabulary in those topic areas in order to improve your writing.

## **Collocations**

Collocations, words which commonly occur together, can trip up language learners both because they may not make sense translated exactly and they

sound so natural to native speakers that not using them will stand out as odd. For example, an express train may also be called a fast train, but not a quick train. On the other hand, fast food is never called express food or quick food.

A further issue with verb phrase collocations is that the prepositions used may completely change the meaning of the verb. For example, “go on” means to continue or happen, but “go off” means rot or explode (gun, fireworks, etc.) or begin to dislike. On and off are usually opposites, but no meaning of “go on” is opposite to any meaning of “go off”.

Another problem with learning collocations easily is that they can change with the context. For example, the opposite of a “bad” cold is a “mild” one. Depending on the context, the opposite of “short” can be “long” (hair, a trip, time, etc.) or “tall” (trees, buildings, mountains, etc.).

For these reasons, studying vocabulary with common collocations is important to achieve higher levels of fluency. More than that, you should work to use collocations in your writing. One useful online resource is SkELL which provides synonyms as well as common collocations with example sentences. Just enter a word, choose collocation from the search options, then click on one of the collocations to get a list of example sentences.

## **Countable and Uncountable Nouns**

Uncountable nouns are difficult for English language learners, because many of these nouns are not uncountable in other languages. Typically, they are objects which are considered difficult to divide, such as liquids (water, milk, etc.). To make this more complicated, many of these objects can be paired with a countable noun (cups of coffee, bowls of rice, pieces of paper, etc.), otherwise, use some/a lot of/a little, rather than a number (some coffee, a lot of rice, a little paper).

When you study uncountable nouns, learn the collocations which make them countable. These are called partitives and the typical structure is: quantity (number)+ measurement+ of+ uncountable noun. To continue with

the above examples, two cups of coffee, one bowl of rice, a dozen pieces of paper, etc.

Conjunctions and transitions are both important for letting your reader know how your sentences and paragraphs are connected. Conjunctions and transitions join clauses, sentences, and paragraphs.

There are four types of conjunctions: coordinating, correlative, subordinating, and adverbial/linking conjunctions. You probably learned FANBOYS to remember coordinating conjunctions. That stands for for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so. These words can join nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, phrases, and clauses. These come in quite handy for joining short sentences making longer ones. Correlative conjunctions are pairs of words used to emphasize the relationship between two items. Note: the items can be nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs, but both parts must be the same.

The five correlative conjunctions are:

both \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_

not \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_

either \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_

neither \_\_\_\_\_ nor \_\_\_\_\_

not only \_\_\_\_\_ but also \_\_\_\_\_

Subordinating conjunctions are used to create subordinate clause which must be paired with a main clause to make a complete sentence. These words include: after, although, as, as much as, because, before, how, if, in order that, since, than, that, unless, and until.

Finally, linking adverbs, like coordinating conjunctions, join two sentences. The difference is that they show more types of relationships between the two clauses: continuation, contrast, sequence, cause and effect, and result. You can show continuation with these words: also, beside, further, furthermore, in addition, and moreover. For example, you can show contrast



with these words: conversely, however, instead, nevertheless, nonetheless, and on the other hand.

Transitions can be used to show addition, comparison, contrast, summary, condition, cause and effect/result, or time/sequence. Additive transitions are used when adding similar ideas or information. Comparative transitions show similarities, while adversative transitions are used to introduce ideas which contrast with or do not agree with the previous ones. Causal transitions show cause and effect or reason and result. Sequential transitions show the chronological (time) or logical order. Other transitional words and phrases indicate some condition, such as: whether, otherwise, and however+adverb. Others can summarize previous statements, such as: finally, in other words, and therefore.

To review as well as practice conjunctions and transitions, check out our PDF worksheet: [www.jackiebolen.com/conjunctions](http://www.jackiebolen.com/conjunctions).

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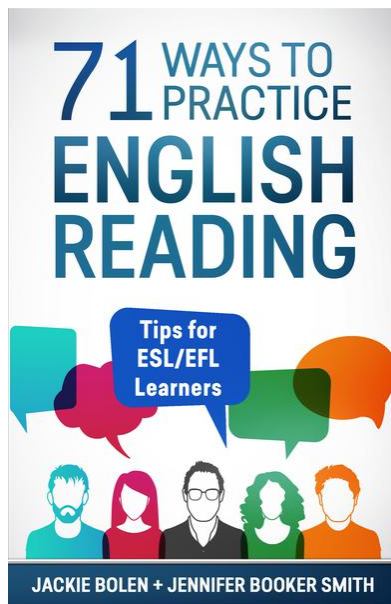
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