

Grammar and Mechanics Topics

Reading through these grammar rules and examples will help prepare you for part 1 of the English Competency Exam. The English Competency Exam is one option for fulfilling the English Writing Competency requirement at Eternity Bible College.

This document is a compilation of the specific rules that you will see in the multiple-choice portion of the exam. These examples are taken from The Little Seagull Handbook which is available (with a free account) through Internet Archive.

The Little Seagull Handbook by Richard Bullock and Francine Weinberg

https://archive.org/details/littleseagullhan0000bull_i6k0

In the examples below, [the words in brackets] are meant to be the solution to the error that is crossed out. When beneficial, *addition explanation is given in red italics.*

Topic: Placing Modifiers Carefully

Rule. Place adjectives, adverbs, and other modifiers so that readers clearly understand which words they modify.

Examples: The doctor [at the seminar] explained advances in cancer treatment to the families of patients ~~at the seminar~~. *The doctor, not the patients, is at the seminar.*

[Before the anesthesiologist arrived], T(t)he surgeons assured the patient that they intended to make only two small incisions ~~before the anesthesiologist arrived~~.
The original sentence suggests that the incisions will be made without anesthesia, surely not the case.

Rule. To avoid ambiguity, position limiting modifiers such as *almost, even, just, merely,* and *only* next to the word or phrase they modify—and be careful that your meaning is clear.

Example: *See how the placement of only can result in two completely different meanings:*
A triple-threat athlete, Martha ~~only~~ played soccer [only] in college.
A triple-threat athlete, Martha ~~only~~ played [only] soccer in college.

Rule. Be careful that your placement of *not* doesn't result in a meaning you don't intend.

Example: When I attended college, [not] every student was ~~not~~ using a laptop.

Rule. Modifiers are said to be dangling when they do not clearly modify any particular word in the sentence. You can usually fix a dangling modifier by adding a SUBJECT that the modifier clearly refers to, either in the rest of the sentence or in the modifier itself.

Examples: Speaking simply and respectfully, [the doctor comforted] many people ~~felt comforted by the doctor's~~ [with his] presentation. *The doctor was speaking, not the other people.*

While [I was] running to catch the bus, the shoulder strap on my bag broke.

Rule. When you place a modifier between *to* and the base form of the verb in an infinitive, you create a split infinitive: *to deliberately avoid*. When a split infinitive is awkward or makes a sentence difficult to follow, put the modifier elsewhere in the sentence.

Example: Professional soccer players are expected to ~~rigorously~~ train [rigorously] every day.

Topic: Incorporating Quotations

Practice using quoted material with some sentences that refer to the following passage from a 2013 *Atlantic* article about fast food:

Passage: Introduced in 1991, the McLean Deluxe was perhaps the boldest single effort the food industry has ever undertaken to shift the masses to healthier eating.
--David Freedman, "How Junk Food Can End Obesity"

Assume that you might not want or need to quote the entire passage, so you incorporate just one part of Freedman's sentence into one of your sentences, as follows:

Inaccurate example: Freedman refers to a failed McDonald's menu item "the McLean Deluxe was perhaps the food industry's boldest single effort to shift the masses to healthier eating."

This is AWKWARDLY structured and hard to understand. Also, the quoted section doesn't exactly match the author's words. There are two points to consider when incorporating quoted material. One strategy is to adjust your own words to accommodate the quoted material; another is to lightly modify the quoted material to fit your sentence.

Improved Example: Referring to a failed McDonald's menu item, Freedman notes that "the McLean Deluxe was perhaps the [food industry's] boldest single effort... to shift the masses to healthier eating."

We added in the signal phrase (Freedman notes that) to introduce the quoted words. Also, we added brackets [] to enclose anything from the quotation that was changed or added. Finally, we added ellipses ... to show where any content from the original quote has been omitted.

Topic: Words Often Confused

Rule. Many words are mistakenly interchanged with other words that sound similar; these are called homophones. These words are often misused and overlooked by spell checks. The only way to avoid these errors is to have an understanding of the difference in meaning and when to use which word. Consider the following abbreviated list of examples:

Examples: accept/except – Accept is a verb that means "to receive willingly": accept an award. Except is a preposition that means "excluding": all languages except English.

affect/effect – Affect is a verb that means "to produce a change in": Stress can affect health. Effect is a noun that means "result": The effects of smoking are well known.

its/it's – Its is a possessive pronoun: The movie is rated R because of its language. IT's is a contraction of "it is" or "it has": It's an action film.

lay/lie – Lay, meaning "to put" or "to place," always takes a direct object: She lays the blanket down. Lie, meaning "to recline" or "to be positioned," never takes a direct object: She lies on the blanket.

Topic: Apostrophes/ Possessives

Rule. Use an apostrophe to make a word possessive

Examples: Daniel **Craig's** eyes
someone **else's** problem
the **children's** playground
The **neighbors'** complaints about noise led the club owner to install soundproof insulation.
The **surgeon general's** report persuaded many people to stop smoking.

Rule. An apostrophe in a contraction indicates where letters have been omitted

Examples: **I've** learned that sometimes friends and business **don't** mix.

Topic: Commas

Rule. Put a comma before the **coordinating conjunction** (and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet) when they connect two independent clauses.

Examples: I do not love Shakespeare, **but** I still have those books.
Most people think the avocado is a vegetable, **yet** it is actually a fruit.

Rule. Use a comma after an introductory word, phrase, or clause to mark the end of the introduction and the start of the main part of the sentence.

Examples: Typically, a girl has a best friend with whom she sits and talks.
In terms of wealth rather than income, the top 1 percent control 40 percent.
When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral.

Rule. Use a comma to separate the items in a series. The items may be words, phrases, or clauses.

Examples: I spend a great deal of time thinking about the power of language—the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea, or a simple truth.
Nadia held a large platter of sandwiches—egg salad, peanut butter, ham, and cheese.

Rule. A nonessential element is one that could be deleted without changing the basic meaning of the sentence; it should be set off with commas.

Examples: Spanish, which is a Romance language, is one of six official languages at the United Nations.

He always drove Chryslers, which are made in America.

Rule. Parenthetical information is information that interrupts the flow of a sentence and needs to be set off with commas.

Examples: Bob's conduct, most of us will immediately respond, was gravely wrong.

With as little as two servings of vegetables a day, it seems to me, you can improve your eating habits.

Rule. Transitions (thus, nevertheless, for example, in fact) connect sentences or parts of sentences. They are usually set off with commas.

Examples: The real world, however, is run by money.

Rule. Use commas to set off quoted words from the speaker or source.

Examples: Pa shouts back, "I just want to know where the gunfire is coming from."

"You put a slick and a con man together," she said, "and you have predatory lenders."

Topic: Pronouns

Rule. Antecedents are the words that pronouns refer to. A pronoun must agree with its antecedent in gender and number.

Examples: Grandma took **her** pie out of the oven.

My grandparents spent weekends at **their** cabin on Big Bear Lake.

Every lab technician should always wear goggles to protect **his or her** eyes while working with chemicals.

Lab technicians should always wear goggles to protect **their** eyes while working with chemicals.

Rule. Collective nouns (audience, committee, team) take a singular pronoun when they refer to the group as a whole and a plural pronoun when they refer to members of the group as individuals.

Example: The winning team drew its inspiration from the manager.

The winning team threw their gloves in the air.

Rule. If there is more than one word that a pronoun could refer to, rewrite the sentence to clarify which one is the antecedent.

Example: After I plugged the printer into the computer, [the printer] ~~it~~ sputtered and died.

What sputtered and died—the computer or the printer? The edit makes the reference clear.

Rule. Pronouns that function as subjects are in the subject case; those functioning as objects are in the object case; those functioning as possessives are in the possessive case.

Examples: In fact, Li was not the one who broke the code; **I** broke it.

On our vacations, my grandfather and **I** went fishing together.

There were never any secrets between **him** and **me**.

You trust John more than **me**. (*meaning, you trust John more than you trust me*)

You trust John more than **I** do. (*meaning, you trust John more than I trust John*)

Topic: Verbs

Rule. Subjects and verbs should agree with each other in number (singular or plural) and person (first, second, or third).

Examples: A 1922 **ad** for Resinol soap **urges** women to “make that dream come true” by using Resinol.

In the backyard, the **leaves** of the apple tree **rattle** across the lawn.

The **price** of soybeans **fluctuates** according to demand.

Rule. Compound subjects are two or more subjects joined by *and* and are generally plural, unless the subject forms a single unit.

Example: Swiss cheese and shrimp **are** both high in vitamin B12.

Forty acres and a mule **is** what General William T. Sherman promised each freed slave.

Rule. If subjects are joined by *or* or *nor*, the verb should agree with the closer subject.

Examples: Either you are she **is** mistaken.

Neither the teacher nor his students **were** able to solve the equation.

Rule. Indefinite pronouns such as *anyone, anything, each, either, everyone, everything, neither, nobody, no one, one, somebody, someone* and *something* take a singular verb, even if they seem plural or refer to plural nouns.

Examples: Everyone in our dorm **has** already **signed** the petition.

Each of the candidates **agrees** with the president.

Rule. Indefinite pronouns such as *both, few, many, others, and several* are always plural.

Examples: Although there are many great actors working today, few **are** as versatile as Meryl Streep.

Rule. A verb should agree with its subject, not with another word that falls in between.

Example: In the backyard, the **leaves** of the apple tree **rattle** across the lawn.

Topic: Sentence Fragments

Rule. A sentence fragment is a group of words that is capitalized and punctuated as a sentence but is not a sentence. (*This is unacceptable in academic writing.*)

Examples: Although the Yankees loaded the bases.

Political commercials appearing on television more frequently than in years past

Put off by negative campaigning.

Topic: Comma Splices and Fused Sentences

Rule. A comma splice occurs when two or more independent clauses follow one another with only a comma between them. (*This is unacceptable in academic writing.*)

Example: T. S. Eliot is best known for his poetry, he also wrote several plays.

Rule. A fused sentence occurs when two or more independent clauses follow one another with no punctuation in between. (*This is unacceptable in academic writing.*)

Example: The school board debated the issue for three days they were unable to reach an agreement.