WE

Avoiding Common Mistakes When Writing Academic English - General

Here you can learn about

- **some of the common mistakes in written (academic) English and how to avoid them.**

This sheet provides information on common mistakes made in English texts by both native speakers and non-native speakers. It is connected to _Information Sheet 16a_ on common mistakes often made by German native speakers writing academic English. An associated worksheet is also available.

Background Information

Common mistakes in written academic English are similar to those in any written English. The mistakes covered in this information sheet arise at the sentence and word level and from a misunderstanding of grammar or vocabulary issues. They cause difficulties for both native and non-native speakers. You will see them throughout papers from all disciplines. Further information about potential interference from a mother tongue is available in _information sheets 17_ and _17a_ on the influence of culture on writing.

Common Mistakes for Native and Non-native Speakers of English

Here are four common mistakes made in written academic English

 1) **Dangling modifiers** (modifiers are explained in the Information Sheet Glossary).

A dangling modifier arises when the subject of the sentence cannot "do" what the modifier is stating has been done, e.g., _When looking at the demographic patterns, a homogenous structure can be seen._ In this sentence, _When looking at the demographic patterns_ is the modifier and _a homogenous structure_ is the subject. However, _a homogenous structure_ cannot _look_ at anything. Therefore, the modifier is dangling because it cannot attach itself to the subject of the sentence. A correct alternative would be, e.g., _A homogenous structure can be seen in the demographic patterns._

Graduate School of Geosciences

University of Cologne

DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
German Research Foundation

2) *Such as/like*

Such as should be used to include an item/items in something you are referring to; *like* should be used to compare an item/items to something you are referring to without including it/them in the category. For example,

a. *I went to the zoo and saw animals such as lions and tigers.* In this sentence I actually saw lions and tigers.
b. *I went to the zoo and saw animals like lions and tigers.* In this sentence I didn't see any lions and tigers, I only saw animals that looked like them, e.g., puma or cheetahs.

3) *Beside/besides*

Beside means physically next to, e.g., *Anne was sitting beside Jill.*
Besides means *In addition to*, e.g., *Besides Anne and Jill, Roger was also present.*

4) *Which/that*

> Generally, there is a comma before a non-defining (*which*) clause; generally, there is no comma before a defining (*that*) clause.

> For more information on clauses, see Information Sheet 9: Structuring Sentences -The Basics

Which should be used to add extra information about a topic. *That* should be used to define exactly what is being referred to, e.g., when there is more than one alternative. For example,

a. *The bikes, which weren't locked, were stolen.* In this sentence, none of the bikes were locked and they were, therefore, all stolen. The clause *which weren't locked* is providing extra information about all the bikes; information that is useful but not essential to understanding the sentence. It is a non-defining clause.
b. *The bikes that weren't locked were stolen.* In this sentence, there were two types of bikes, those that were locked and those that weren't locked. The clause *that weren't locked* is defining which of the two types is being referred to. The information in that clause is essential to understanding the sentence. It is a defining clause.

Useful Resources

Glasman-Deal, H. 2009. *Science Research Writing for Non-native Speakers of English*. London, Imperial College Press.
Wallwork, A. 2011. *English for Writing Research Papers*. New York, Springer.

Final Comments/Tips

- Academic written English is fairly formal and should be precise. In less formal writing, e.g., emails, where precision is not so essential, these mistakes play a smaller role.

Graduate School of Geosciences

University of Cologne

DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
German Research Foundation