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English Revisited:

Tips, Tidbits & Tutorials

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Glossary

punctuation: comma, period, semi-colon, colon, etc.

come into being: to start existing

distinction: differences between things or people

chock-full: completely full

Editorial

Getting straight to the point, so to speak, this issue of the newsletter begins with a lesson on punctuation, or more specifically, the comma. We have covered this topic in the past, but its complicated rules invite further review. You will also learn a bit about how research universities came into being while you refresh your memory or learn new information about the comma.

Next, as our intercultural section points out, "It is possible to have adequate grammar and vocabulary, but still write in a way that is difficult for others to understand." Here, we will take a look at some of the distinctions in academic writing

styles for German and Anglo-Saxon contexts.

Lastly, one of the most common mistakes that foreign speakers of English make is to add an "s" to words like "information." English is chock-full of words that do not have a plural form, which are called uncountable nouns. Our vocabulary section will concentrate on the academic variety.

Dr. Joseph Michaels

University Glossary

The latest version of our university glossary is available on our [website](#).

Upcoming Issues:

Grammar, vocabulary, and cultural differences in e-mails



Comments

Do you have any ideas for future issues or would like to give us feedback? Please contact us.



Subscription

Currently on Offer

If you are interested in any of the following, please **contact us**.

- **Mini-Workshops for Administrative Staff** – Enrollment is now open for our June workshops. Staff can sharpen their skills in business and professional English in this relaxed, friendly environment. All of the workshops are free. <http://www.sz.uni-stuttgart.de/englisch/workshops-ma/>
- **Seminars for Academic Staff** – Various workshops are available from April to June for academic staff, such as accent reduction and English literature review. These seminars are free. More information can be found here: <http://www.sz.uni-stuttgart.de/englisch/seminars-akad-ma/index.html>

Grammar

Commas Save Lives

They are smaller than letters, carry no meaning in themselves, yet, may save lives: commas. What may seem a strange statement becomes clear when comparing the following sentences:

Let's eat grandpa!
Let's eat, grandpa!

In your English lessons you may have heard that Anglos put a comma whenever they catch their breath. This is not entirely wrong, but there is more to punctuation than that, i.e. there are punctuation rules – and where to put commas can change the meaning of a sentence fundamentally. A professor once asked his mixed-gender group to put punctuation marks in the sentence:

A woman without her man is nothing.

To both of the genders the answer was crystal clear:

A woman: Without her, man is nothing. (female solution and an apposition, see [4] below)
A woman, without her man, is nothing. (male solution and an insertion, see [5] below)

Apparently, the little markers change how we look at the world, yet, what guidelines are there?

As in part pointed out in [Newsletter 4/2015](#), commas **are used**

- to separate non-defining relative clauses [1]
- to separate a subordinate clause when it comes first in a sentence [2]
- to structure listings [3]
- to set apart appositions [4] and insertions or asides [5]
- to set apart discourse markers indicating change or contrast [6]
- to introduce quotations (Americans have all commas outside the quotation marks, Brits have them inside the quotation marks [7])

A big note here: Commas **are not used** before “that” in relative clauses. We use “which” instead. We also do not use a comma before subordinate clauses beginning with such words as “where”, “when”, “what”, “who”, “why”, “whether”, “if”, “since” and “because” when they appear second in a sentence. For example:

The thing that he mentioned specifically the other day is that commas make a difference. (correct)
The thing, which he mentioned amongst others, is

that commas make a difference. (correct)
It is possible, when we work together. (wrong)

Here are some further examples¹:

We may think of the Middle Ages as a dark age. Contrary to this, however, [6] it was an age where people, at least some of them, [5] acted globally; an age in which trade and commerce developed and science flourished. [No comma here, because the sub-clause is a defining one.]

Early European research universities very much looked like the University of Bologna, which was founded as early as 1088 CE in Italy. [1] In quick succession other university foundations followed, such as the University of Vincenza, Cambridge, Salamanca, Padua, and many more.² [3]

Though Bologna is considered the “mother of universities” by most, it is disputable whether it really is the oldest institution worthy of the title university. [2]

If the term “university” is used for a single body of students and professors of different disciplines, the University of Paris (founded in 1208) was the first proper university. [2]

Regardless of this dispute, [4] the early universities of the Middle Ages played an indispensable role in the dissemination of the knowledge of antiquity. The rediscovery of ancient Greco-Roman knowledge led to the development of student guilds, which provided the basis for the foundation of universities throughout Europe. [1]

“In the process of retrieving philosophical and scientific knowledge of the ancient Greeks”, an expert commented, “translator schools like that of Toledo played a vital role, translating scripts that had got lost in the Occident due to Christianization.” [7] Aristotle’s works and with them a lot of the body of Greek philosophy “came to us in an Arab robe” as the scripts survived in the Arab world and could be retranslated into Latin.

For more sentences on the history of the research university and an exercise where you can test your comma placement skills and receive feedback, click below.

Dr. Ines Böhner

Source/Note

¹ Adapted from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_European_research_universities

² The comma before “and” here is commonly known as the Oxford comma and can but does not have to appear in academic writing. This is a matter of choice.

Glossary

commerce:
buying or selling on a large scale

disputable:
open to question or debate

discipline:
a branch of knowledge or study

indispensable:
cannot do without it

vital:
crucial



Exercises

Intercultural Communication

Reader Friendliness

Have you ever been told that your research is good, but your writing is “awkward?” It is possible to have adequate grammar and vocabulary, but still write in a way that is difficult for others to understand. According to a 2011 study by Thomas Armstrong of German-speaking scholars in Switzerland, “reader friendliness” is one of the most common and frustrating issues that come up when native German speakers seek to publish in English.¹ This is because the expectations of readers and writers vary across cultures. By identifying some key differences between German and English writing styles, we can foster better reader friendliness in our own writing, meaning we can write in a way that is easier for readers to follow. In addition to making our writing less awkward, this approach can also make our texts more persuasive. Michael Clyne and Dirk Siepmann have already published extensive academic research on the differences between German and English academic writing styles.² This article is too limited to delve into their findings in depth, but a few key tips are included here to get you started.

Overall, academic writing in English tends to be simpler and more direct. Although your research may be nuanced and complicated, the best way to promote reader friendliness in English is to keep the writing itself simple. Keeping it simple does not mean “dumbing it down.” It is not your responsibility to adjust the contents of the paper to a kindergarten level, but it is essential that you keep the language use from interfering with the message. Your writing should be easy to understand, even if the material is complex.

One of the easiest ways to keep it simple for the reader is to follow standard English syntax, which is subject + verb + everything else (direct object, indirect object, place, time, etc.). It is possible to deviate from this structure, and preferable to do so in certain contexts, but this is the default structure. If you choose to deviate, you should have a good reason.

Another essential skill is to break up long, complex sentences into shorter, more direct ones. According to Diarmuid De Faoite, German academic writing favors long sentences, which can be up to twice the average length of typical English ones. He argues that by reducing sentence length and writing with a more direct approach, writers can greatly enhance their reader’s understanding of a text.³

Notice how these two tips apply to the following examples:

Too much information before the subject and verb

Due to their remarkable performance in terms of compactness, cost effectiveness, environmental insensitivity and effective thermal dissipation, if compared with pulsed solid-state lasers, such as telecommunication, sensing, spectroscopy, and medicine, **pulsed fibre lasers possess** great advantages for various applications.⁴

Clearer syntax

Pulsed fibre lasers possess great advantages for various applications if compared with pulsed solid-state lasers, such as telecommunication, sensing, spectroscopy, and medicine, due to their remarkable performance in terms of compactness, cost effectiveness, environmental insensitivity and effective thermal dissipation.

Clear separation of ideas

Pulsed fibre lasers possess great advantages for various applications if compared with pulsed solid-state lasers. **These applications include** telecommunication, sensing, spectroscopy, and medicine. **The advantages are** due to their remarkable performance in terms of compactness, cost effectiveness, environmental insensitivity and effective thermal dissipation.

Click on the exercise below for two more tips on fostering reader friendliness in English academic texts and some practice exercises.

Dr. Lucy Blaney-Laible

Sources

¹ Armstrong, T. (2011, Autumn). Reader-friendliness and feedback: German-L1 scholars’ perceptions of writing for publication in English. *Journal of Academic Writing*, 1(1), 153-164.

² Clyne, M. (1987). Cultural differences in the organization of academic texts: English and German. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 11, 211-247.

³ Siepmann, D. (2006). Academic writing and culture: an overview of differences between English, French and German. *Translators' Journal*, 51(1), 131-150.

De Faoite, D. (2009). *The Write Stuff*, 18(4).

⁴ Adapted from: D. Li et al. (2016). *Applied Materials Today*, 4, 17-23.

Glossary

foster:
to encourage the development of something

to delve into: to reach inside (something) and explore

to dumb down:
to make something very easy to understand

to deviate from:
to depart from the expected course

default:
the automatic setting

to enhance:
to increase the quality or value



Exercises

Vocabulary

Academic Uncountable Nouns

Certain types of grammar can take years to master. In English, uncountable nouns come up in lessons for school children as well as university-level courses. The difficulty with uncountable nouns does not have to do with the simple concept itself: do not add “s” to the word. It is the sheer number of them that makes it difficult to remember which words are uncountable. For instance, here¹ is a list of 1,147 uncountable nouns along with the CEFR levels (A1 – C2) shown next to each word. For our readers we will concentrate on the rules and words appropriate for a B2-C1 level and academic uncountable nouns, which will be shown in *italics*.

The name “uncountable” is somewhat misleading since some words that fall under this category have strong associations with the actual act of counting, like *money*. There are also some words that have both uncountable and countable forms, depending on whether one is referring to something in general or as “units or types.”² For example, a word that one often comes across at the University of Stuttgart is *technology*:

Renewable energy *technology* is an essential tool for limiting the effects of climate change.
Renewable energy *technologies* such as wind, hydro, and solar power will especially be crucial.

The academic terms *scholarship* and *instruction* are further examples of words that exist as both uncountable and countable nouns, but their meaning changes. *Scholarship* in the singular denotes academic accomplishments or status. In the plural, it refers to grants offered for students. *Instruction* in the singular means a way of teaching while *instructions* is synonymous with directions and rules.

Professor Cather was admired for her *scholarship* in the field of comparative literature.
Many graduate schools in the United States offer competitive *scholarships*.
Mr. Frederick’s style of *instruction* relies heavily on rote learning.
The student was scolded for not following the *instructions*.

The words “much” and “less” are often paired with uncountable nouns, but there are some exceptions. Which of the following sentences use these words correctly?

1. Much *time* was spent on analyzing the results.
2. This particular resource did not contain much *data* about it.

3. A comparison of census *information* over several years reveals that parents are having less children in developing countries.

4. The airport is located less than five kilometers away from downtown.

5. Checkout in this aisle is reserved for customers with ten items or less.

The third sentence is incorrect, but the other four are possible. You may have felt that the first sentence is strange since using “much” with positive sentences can sound stuffy. One friend would never say to another, “I have much time. Let’s do it.” In formal contexts, however, we can use “much” with positive sentences and uncountable nouns, but it appears most often in questions or negative sentences (as in the second sentence). Hopefully you noticed that “children” was not italicized in the third sentence because it is not an uncountable noun. According to a survey, 21% of English speakers mistakenly use “less” with words that have irregular plural forms like “children” and “people.”³ “Less” should be replaced with “fewer” in the third sentence since the latter is used for countable plural nouns. But there is a caveat to this! When using numbers on their own, using phrases with “than,” or when talking about distance, time, ages or sums of money, “less” is used instead of “few” or “fewer.” Lastly, though grammatically somewhat awkward, “ten items or less” is an accepted phrase found at supermarkets.

If it seems like a Herculean task to have to learn all of the uncountable nouns, this may be a good time to mention that the word *schadenfreude* exists in English, too, and that the German language forces foreigners to learn the gender of every single noun and 16 ways to say “the.” Such complicated idiosyncrasies of any language inevitably lead to the need for repeated practice.

Click below for further practice with “much,” “many,” “less,” “few,” and “fewer” and more academic uncountable nouns.

Dr. Joseph Michaels

Sources

¹ Schoondy, G. (2016, Dec. 29). *1,147 uncountable nouns*. Retrieved from <https://www.slideshare.net/GeorgeSchoondy/1147-uncountable-nouns-list>

² Oxford English Dictionary. *Mass noun*. Retrieved from https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mass_noun

³ Soanes, C. (2012, Aug. 10). Less or fewer. *Oxford Dictionary Blog*. Retrieved from <https://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2012/08/10/less-or-fewer/>

Glossary

sheer: used to emphasize an exceptional quality or quantity

to denote: to show

rote learning: memorizing through repetition

to scold: to speak to someone angrily because of their behavior

stuffy: very formal and serious

caveat: a warning about an exception



Exercises