



How to Write and Speak Better in English

COMMUNICATION CORNER No. 56

by Philip Yaffe

Editor's Introduction

Each "[Communication Corner](#)" essay is self-contained; however, they build on each other. For best results, before reading this essay and doing the exercise, go to the first essay "[How an Ugly Duckling Became a Swan](#)," then read each succeeding essay.

Throughout these "Communication Corner" essays, the assumption has always been that most readers use English as their native language. However, there is a not-insignificant number of readers around the world for whom English is a second, third, or even fourth language. Nevertheless, they too must often write and speak in English.



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If you are among the many people who must write in English as their second or even third language, I don't need to explain what a challenge this is. It is immense. In this "Communication Corner" essay, I would like to point out some key aspects of how English works that might be different from your native language. By keeping these key ideas in mind, you can significantly improve how you write and speak in English.

If English is your native language, you are probably already aware of many of these key ideas, but subconsciously. Bringing them to the conscious level can also help improve how you write and speak. So here they are.

General vs. Specific

English usually distinguishes general things from specific things by whether or not it employs the definite article ("the").

- I like cats (cats in general).
- I like the cats (specific cats, not necessarily all cats).

Exception: It is common to use a singular noun to represent a totality.

- The dog is man's best friend (all dogs, all people).
- The computer is changing society (all computers, not just one in particular).

Important Difference Between "a" and "one"

The words "a" and "one" mean the same thing. "One" is more precise; therefore, it adds emphasis.

- I have eaten in a Japanese restaurant (at least once, perhaps more).
- I have eaten in one Japanese restaurant (precisely once, no more).

It is often clear from context whether "a" means more than once rather than only once. But be certain that it does. Otherwise make the distinction so as not to confuse your readers or listeners.

Repetition for Clarity

Do not be afraid to repeat a word for clarity and emphasis. Continually changing terminology causes hesitation and diminishes comprehension.

- The big dog looked at me strangely. I am afraid of big dogs, so I cautiously moved away.
- *Not:* The big dog looked at me strangely. I am afraid of large canines, so I cautiously moved away.

Active vs. Passive Voice

English uses passive voice much more than some other languages.

- Active voice = action and/or conviction
- Passive voice = neutrality and/or indifference

Active voice is preferred except where neutrality and/or indifference are consciously desired.

- Active voice: Management approved the new product.
- Passive voice: The new product was approved by management.

You can occasionally mix passive voice with active to avoid an impression of aggressiveness or dogma.

A principal reason English uses passive voice more than many other languages is that it is essentially bereft of "pronominal verbs." This is why native English speakers learning other languages are often confused and puzzled by them.

Pronominal verbs generally take the same form as reflexive verbs, i.e., a verb plus a second word that reflects the action of the verb onto the subject. Examples: John washed himself; Jane blamed herself; the dog hurt itself, etc. A pronominal verb takes the same form; however, the action is not reflected. Instead, the apparently "reflexive" part actually changes the fundamental meaning of the verb.

For example, to say, "He washes his hands" in French is *Il se lave les mains*, literally "He washes himself the hands." This is reflexive. The French verb "to bear or to hit" is *battre*, so you might expect *Il se bat* to mean "He hits himself." However, it doesn't. Being pronominal (non-reflexive), it means to fight or go into battle with someone or something else.

Believe me, as a native English speaker, it took me quite a while to get used to this and other strange-sounding pronominal verbs in French, e.g., *se demander* (to wonder), *se doucher* (to take a shower), *s'entendre* (to get along with), *se fier* (to trust), *se méfier* (to mistrust). But for me, la pièce de résistance (pardon my French) is *se marier* (to get married), which if you didn't know better would mean to marry oneself.

Placement for Emphasis

Words at the beginning and the end of a sentence have stronger emphasis than those in the middle. Put important information in these key locations ("hot spots") to facilitate reader understanding.

- The two national leaders met in the Royal Palace to discuss new trade relations between their countries.
- *Not:* In the Royal Palace the two national leaders met to discuss new trade relations between their two countries.
- *Not:* The two national leaders met to discuss new trade relations between their two countries in the Royal Palace.

Correctly Use the Word "Only"

The word "only" signals an exception or exclusion. Place it as close as possible to what it describes.

- I drink alcohol only with friends, never alone.
- *Not:* I only drink alcohol with friends, never alone.

Note: Many native English speakers will indifferently put only "only" before or after alcohol as in the example. So whichever form you use, you are not likely to be criticized. For the sake of precision, I nevertheless strongly recommend that it be as close as possible to what it describes. Your readers will not consciously notice the difference. However, doing so adds just a little bit more authority to what you are saying. If this situation occurs several times in your text, consistently following this suggestion could make a substantial difference in how well your thesis is received.

Standard vs. Phrasal Adjectives

In English, adjectives generally come in front of a noun, so avoid phrasal adjectives (preposition + noun), which is a phrase that modifies a noun.

- A last-minute decision
- *Not:* A decision of the last minute.

But don't be afraid to use a phrasal adjective when it aids clarity.

- The 14th provision of the European Union Constitution
- *Not:* The 14th European Union Constitution's provision

Tip: If a sentence contains a large number of prepositions (phrasal adjectives), it probably can be rewritten more clearly and concisely.

Verbs for Conciseness, Density

Use verb forms rather than nouns to increase conciseness and density.

- The new product will strongly contribute to increasing profits.
- *Not:* The new product will be a strong contributor to an increase in profits

Active vs. Passive Verbs

Use active verbs rather than passive ones to create a sense of immediacy.

- We have just gone through a difficult period.
- *Not:* We have just been in a difficult period.
- Management is investigating where changes can be made.
- *Not:* Management is looking to see where it is possible to make changes.

Past vs. Present Tense

Don't use the past tense when a present or future situation is clearly indicated.

- The United Nations said that malaria is still a worldwide health menace.
- *Not:* The United Nations said malaria s still a worldwide health menace.

Note: There appears to be some kind of grammatical rule that dictates once something has been put in the past tense, everything else in the sentence must also be put into the past tense. You may not have noticed it, but the first of the two examples above do not abide by diktat, using "said" then "is." Imagine how ridiculous the sentence would sound if it had been written: "The United Nations said *five minutes ago* that malaria *was* still a worldwide health menace." Certainly, the U.N. spokesman wasn't expecting anything to happen in the next five minutes, hours, days, months, or probably even years that would radically change the situation. So why write about it as if it has already happened?

Progressive vs. Fixed Tense

English verbs carefully distinguish between something that is happening now and something that frequently happens or has happened and is now finished. Correct use of these verb tenses can add interest and aid clarity.

1. Simple present: I eat (in order to live)
2. Present progressive: I am eating (at this very moment)
3. Simple past: I ate yesterday.
4. Past progressive: I was eating when the telephone rang

Infinitive vs. Noun

In English, one verb seldom follows another. The preferred form is to show the result of an action (noun) rather than the action to be taken (infinitive).

- Past progressive: The man began eating.
- *Not:* The man began to eat.

Note: Grammatically, there is absolutely nothing wrong with the second version of the sentence, which is in the simple past tense. However, stylistically the first version, written in the past progressive, gives a more vivid picture of what the man is actually doing.

Eliminate the Definite Article

The definite article (the) is generally used to:

- Identify a specific thing

- Refer to a previously mentioned thing

When this is clear from the context, the definite article may be eliminated, for example:

- Incorrect: English uses the definite article more definitely than do *the* other languages in *the* other countries of the E.U.
- Correct: English uses the definite article more definitely than other languages in other countries of the E.U.

Another example:

- Incorrect: *The* European Union Commissioners yesterday discussed *the* ways to help *the* new E.U. members more easily integrate their economies.
- Correct: European Union Commissioners yesterday discussed ways to help new E.U. members more easily integrate their economies.
 - The [all] European Union Commissioners, not a specific group of them
 - the [all] ways to help, not a specific set of them
 - the [all] new E.U. members, not only the most recent 10 members

Avoid Using the Conjunction "and"

The conjunction "and" is like an equal sign, indicating that the two ideas it connects have essentially the same weight. However, often they don't; one idea is more important than the other. Make this relationship explicit; don't expect the reader or listener to do it.

Poor

- It started to rain *and* John went into the house.

Better

- It started to rain, *so* John went into the house.
- It started to rain; *therefore* John went into the house.
- *Because* it started to rain, John went into the house.
- *As* it started to rain, John went into the house.
- *When* it started to rain, John went into the house.

Tip: Use your spell checker to search for the word "and." If it truly does act as an equal sign, i.e., connect two ideas with essentially the same weight, leave it alone. However, if the two ideas do not have the same weight, rewrite the sentence to make this difference explicit.

Note: Grammatically, "and" is known as a coordinating conjunction because it links two things of equivalent weight. "So," "therefore," "because," "as," "when" etc. are known as subordinating conjunctions because they serve to show that the two parts of the sentence have different weights, i.e., one part is subordinated to the other. This misuse of the coordinating conjunction "and" probably occurs in virtually all other languages. So using it incorrectly is unlikely to expose you to criticism no matter in what language you are writing. However, using it correctly adds just a little more authority to what you are saying. If this situation occurs several times during your text, consistently using coordinating conjunction "and" only when it is really needed could make a substantial difference in how well your thesis is received.

Good writing (in any language) is not easy. . .but it gets easier.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip Yaffe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1942 and grew up in Los Angeles, where he graduated from the University of California with a degree in mathematics and physics. In his senior year, he was also editor-in-chief of the *Daily Bruin*, UCLA's daily student newspaper. He has more than 40 years of experience in journalism and international marketing communication. At various points in his career, he has been a teacher of journalism, a reporter/feature writer with *The Wall Street Journal*, an account executive with a major international press relations agency, European marketing communication director with two major international companies, and a founding partner of a specialized marketing communication agency in Brussels, Belgium, where he has lived since 1974. He is the author of more than 30 books, which can be found easily in Amazon Kindle.

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