



English Skills Handbook

English Skills and Common Marking Symbols (CMS) - Introduction.

This handbook is designed to help you during the course of your two year study programme at Aquinas College. It is meant to be used alongside the marking codes your tutors will use when they mark your written work, (see below). Tutors use these marking codes in order to help you to identify errors that are stopping you from communicating as effectively as you can, therefore hampering your progress. You should use this booklet to help you correct those errors; if you don't understand **how** to correct errors and improve your English skills, look at the contents page and refer to the appropriate section of the handbook for helpful tips and explanations.

Error	Action	Symbol
Good point	Tick at end of point	✓
Excellent point	Double tick at end of point	✓✓
Incorrect point	Cross at end of point	X
Spelling error	sp in margin and circle word	sp
Missing/incorrect punctuation	p in margin and circle errant/missing punctuation	p
Grammatical error	gr in margin and underline error	gr
New sentence needed	One forward slash where new sentence should begin	/
New paragraph needed	Two forward slashes where new paragraph should begin	//
Capital letter required	cap in margin and circle missing/errant capital letter	cap
Word/s missing	Insert caret (upside down v) where missing word is required	^
Unclear – needs clarification	Underline relevant area and question mark in margin	?
Informal/inappropriate expression	Wiggly underline	

A note about 'correct' English

This handbook isn't designed to suggest that there is one 'correct' way of using English; we recognise that the English language is constantly evolving and people use it in different ways depending on the context in which they're using it. When you write in a formal context, for example when you're writing exam responses or essays, you should aim to make your writing more formal; in these contexts, the guidance given in this handbook should be helpful to you. That doesn't mean, however, that the versions of English you use in other situations, such as conversations with friends or in text messages, is 'wrong'; it is just 'different'.

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Help with Spelling:

Many people experience problems with English spelling.

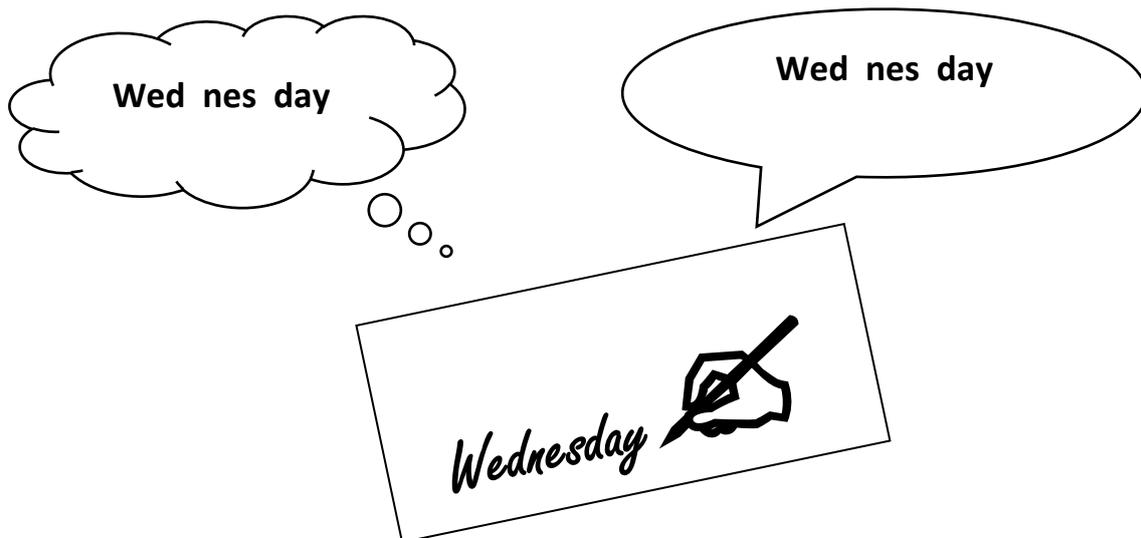
Part of the reason for this may be that there are so many inconsistencies in the English language. Consequently, some people find it easy to pick up the spelling of new words they come across, whereas others struggle to remember the spelling of even common words. It is, however, worth persisting with learning to spell correctly, as improving your spelling will help you communicate more effectively and make you more employable. Correct spelling improves the overall presentation of your work and will help with your confidence in writing.

If you find it difficult to remember the spelling of words, you will need to put time and effort into learning the spelling.

Sometimes people can remember the spelling of words they used at primary school, because putting time and effort into learning spellings was expected at primary school; they have more problems with spelling words they have learned later, because they had no encouragement to work at learning the spellings.

Because of the way the English language has developed, we need two different strategies for accurate spelling: **visual** and **auditory**. We need to be able to work from the sounds and we need to have a visual memory of a word. Sometimes we need a combination of both.

If you think about an irregular word like 'Wednesday', most people have learned a strategy for spelling it correctly. People usually break it into chunks either in a visual way, so that they can **see** what letters there are in each chunk, or in an auditory way, exaggerating the sounds in their head and saying the word to themselves, so they can **hear** what letters are in what order.



Once you've split a difficult word into chunks visually, so you can see exactly what letters are in the word, and found an exaggerated way of saying it, so you can hear the sounds of all the letters in the word, the **Look, Say, Cover, Write, Check** method that you might have learned at primary school can work really well for fixing the correct spelling in your memory.

Using mnemonics can also work well; for example, remembering '**Big Elephants Can Always Understand Small Elephants**' will remind you of the correct spelling of 'because'. If you come up with your own mnemonics, you are likely to remember them. However, this method can be time-consuming, both for thinking up the mnemonic and for using it as you are writing, so it may be best to try the 'Wed nes day' chunking approach first and just to use mnemonics for words which are really tough.

Learning spellings is a bit like revision; you are likely to learn best if you use a variety of strategies and revisit your learning several times.

If you work hard at learning spellings and still find it very hard to remember how to spell words, you might benefit from some extra support. The Learning Support team at Aquinas run a drop-in session at lunch time every day and will be able to advise you on spelling strategies.

A significant and persistent difficulty with spelling might also be an indicator of a specific difficulty such as dyslexia. Dyslexia affects about 10% of the population and can impact on people of all abilities. The Learning Support Team can assess students for dyslexia and advise on how to manage it.

When time is short, there are other ways of finding the correct spelling of a word: asking somebody else how to spell a word (which is not always reliable), using a dictionary or using the spell check facility on your computer.

Using a Dictionary

The traditional route to checking your spelling is through the use of an English dictionary. Looking up words in dictionaries will also teach you the source of words (and give you an interesting history of usage) as well as providing alternative words you might use instead. For some people this can be fun!

Words in a dictionary are listed alphabetically. Once you have found the first letter of the word you are looking up, you can then start to look for words starting with the first and second letter and so on.

For example:

If you were looking for the correct spelling of the word **dictionary**, first look for words starting with the letter **d**. Once you had found this section, you would then look for words starting with **di**. The next step is to skim through these words looking for words starting with **dic**. Follow this procedure with each letter in the word until you find the word you are seeking. It can be helpful to note down the words in an on-going list when you have looked them up.

Using Spell-Check on Your Computer

If you word-process your work then you will no doubt use the built in spell-check function which checks as you type and instantly marks spelling mistakes or repeated words with a red wavy underline.

You can right click (on a PC) on such words to see a list of alternatives; clicking on the correct spelling will update your work accordingly.

Similarly, grammar errors are highlighted with a blue wavy underline. Right clicking on such a mark will describe the grammar rule that you are breaking and may suggest an alternative wording. **However, caution should be used with grammar checking; there is no substitute for proofreading.**

All word processors, and many other computer applications, also contain full spell-checking facilities. How to access these facilities will vary depending on which package you are using, so check 'Help' if you are unsure how to access a spell check.

Computer spell checkers are not perfect. If, for example, you use an incorrect word, 'wood' when you mean 'would', spell check will not identify the word as being spelt incorrectly. For this reason, you should always read through your work, or have it proofread by someone else.

Finally, you should ensure that your spell check dictionary is set to the correct language, and regional variation of the language if necessary.

For example, if you are based in the UK, you should ensure that your language is set to English (UK) and not English (US), otherwise words like 'colour' or 'honour' will be marked as incorrect. You can usually change the language via the 'Language' item on the 'Tools' menu.

Ask Someone to Check Your Spelling

If you are not good at spelling, there is another remedy (apart from continuous improvement with a dictionary or spell-check). Ask a friend, a relative, colleague or your partner to read your writing and check the spelling for you. However, check out their spelling credentials first!

Always be critical of your own spelling – use the dictionary. Are you as good a speller as you think? **Here are the correct spellings of some of the words people often struggle with:**

- **receive**
- **believe**
- **accessible**
- **irritable**
- **occasional**
- **judgement**
- **acknowledgement**
- **separate**
- **practice** (noun, as in 'I went to the GP's practice', or 'it takes a lot of practice')
- **practise** (verb, as in 'The GP has been practising for years' or 'practise your spelling')
- **principal** (the most important person or thing, as in 'Danny is the college Principal')
- **principle** (an important foundation for a belief, as in 'Danny believes in the principle of fairness')
- **their** (possessive form of 'they')
- **there** (in that place)
- **they're** (contraction of 'they are')
- **accept** (a verb, meaning to receive or to admit to a group)
- **except** (usually a preposition, meaning but or only)
- **who's** (contraction of 'who is' or 'who has')
- **whose** (possessive form of 'who')
- **its** (possessive form of 'it')
- **it's** (contraction of 'it is' or 'it has')
- **your** (possessive form of 'you')
- **you're** (contraction of 'you are')
- **affect** (usually a verb, meaning to influence)
- **effect** (usually a noun, meaning result)
- **than** (used in comparison)
- **then** (refers to a time in the past)
- **were** (form of the verb 'to be')
- **we're** (contraction of 'we are')
- **where** (related to location or place)

Add the correct spellings of words you misspell to this list as you become aware of them.

Checking words in a good dictionary can also be an important facet of studying. It is good practice while you are reading, to record the meanings of essential words so that you fix both their meaning and spelling in your memory.

If you get into the habit of using a dictionary regularly, you will find that your spelling will improve naturally. Good spelling can be learned by memory and repetition. Everyone has certain words which they have a tendency to spell incorrectly. Become aware of your own tendencies and make an effort to record the accurate spelling in your memory.

Activity:

Keep a record of words you spell wrongly to hand, (using the correct spelling of course!) or if using a computer, create a document for this purpose.

Punctuation - Signs and Symbols

Punctuation is the system of signs or symbols given to a reader to show how a sentence is constructed and how it should be read.

Sentences are the building blocks used to construct written accounts. They are complete statements. Punctuation shows how the sentence should be read and makes the meaning clear.

Every sentence should include at least a capital letter at the start, and a full stop, exclamation mark or question mark at the end. This basic system indicates that the sentence is complete.

The Basic Signs of Punctuation

- the comma ,
- the full stop .
- the exclamation mark !
- the question mark ?
- the semi-colon ;
- the colon :
- the apostrophe '
- quotation marks “ ”
- the hyphen -
- brackets () or []
- the dash —
- the slash /

The Comma (,)

The comma is useful in a sentence when the writer wishes to:

- *pause before proceeding*
- *add a phrase that does not contain any new subject*
- *separate items on a list*
- *use more than one adjective (a describing word, like beautiful)*

For example, in the following sentence the phrase or clause between the commas gives us more information behind the actions of the boy, the subject of the sentence:

The boy, who knew that his mother was about to arrive, ran quickly towards the opening door.

Note that if the phrase or clause were to be removed, the sentence would still make sense although there would be a loss of information. Alternatively, two sentences could be used:

The boy ran quickly towards the opening door. He knew that his mother was about to arrive.

Commas are also used to separate items in a list.

For example:

The shopping trolley was loaded high with bottles of beer, fruit, vegetables, toilet rolls, cereals and cartons of milk.

Note that in a list, the final two items are linked by the word 'and' rather than by a comma.

Commas are used to separate adjectives.

For example:

The boy was happy, eager and full of anticipation at the start of his summer holiday. As commas represent a pause, it is good practice to read your writing out loud and listen to where you make natural pauses as you read it. More often than not, you will indicate where a comma should be placed by a natural pause. Although, the 'rules' of where a comma needs to be placed should also be followed.

For example:

However, it has been suggested that some bees prefer tree pollen.

Full Stop (.)

A full stop should always be used to end a sentence. The full stop indicates that a point has been made and that you are about to move on to further explanations or a related point.

Less frequently, a series of three full stops (an ellipsis) can be used to indicate where a section of a quotation has been omitted when it is not relevant to the text, for example:

“The boy was happy... at the start of his summer holiday.”

A single full stop may also be used to indicate the abbreviation of commonly used words as in the following examples:

- Telephone Number = Tel. No.
- September = Sept.
- Pages = pp.

Exclamation Mark (!)

An exclamation mark indicates strong feeling within a sentence, such as fear, anger or love. It is also used to accentuate feeling within the written spoken word.

For example:

“Help! I love you!”

In this way, it can also be used to indicate a sharp instruction

- “Stop! Police!”

or to indicate humour

- “Ha! Ha! Ha!”

The exclamation mark at the end of a sentence means that you do not need a full stop.

Exclamation marks are a poor way of emphasising what you think are important points in your written assignments; the importance of the point will emphasise itself without a sequence of !!! in the text. An exclamation mark should only be used when absolutely essential, or when taken from a direct quote.

The exclamation mark should be used sparingly in formal and semi-formal writing.

Question Mark (?)

The question mark simply indicates that a sentence is asking a question. It always comes at the end of a sentence:

For example:

Are we at the end?

Note that the question mark also serves as a full stop.

Semi-colon (;)

The semi-colon is perhaps the most difficult sign of punctuation to use accurately. If in doubt, avoid using it and convert the added material into a new sentence.

As a general rule, the semi-colon is used in the following ways:

When joining two connected sentences.

For example:

We set out at dawn; the weather looked promising.

or

Assertive behaviour concerns being able to express feelings, wants and desires appropriately; passive behaviour means complying with the wishes of others.

The semi-colon can also be used to assemble detailed lists.

For example:

The conference was attended by delegates from Paris, France; Paris, Texas; London, UK; Stockholm, Sweden; Colombo, Sri Lanka; and Mumbai, India.

Colon (:)

The colon within a sentence makes a very pointed pause between two phrases. There are two main uses of the colon:

It is most commonly used when listing.

For example:

She placed the following items into the trolley: beer, fruit, vegetables, toilet rolls, cereals and cartons of milk.

Or it can be used within a heading, or descriptive title.

For example:

Human Resource Management: Guidelines for Telephone Advisers

Apostrophe (')

The apostrophe, has two main uses.

The apostrophe indicates possession or ownership.

For example:

The girl's hat was green, (girl is in the singular).

This shows the reader that the hat belongs to the girl.

The girls' hats were green, (girls in this instance are plural, i.e. more than one girl, more than one hat).

This indicates that the hats belong to the girls.

Another use of the apostrophe is to indicate where a letter is omitted:

For example:

We're going to do this course. (We are going to do this course.)

Isn't this a fine example of punctuation? (Is not this a fine example of punctuation?)

The time is now 7 o' clock. (The time is now 7 of the clock)

Note that a common mistake is to confuse *its* with *it's*.

It's indicates to the reader that a letter has been omitted.

For example:

It's a lovely day is a **contracted** way of saying: *It is a lovely day.*

Note that in most formal writing, the practice of using contractions is inappropriate.

Quotation or Speech Marks (“...”)

Quotation or speech marks are used to:

1. To mark out speech
2. When quoting someone else's speech/writing

For example:

My grandpa said, *"Share your chocolates with your friends."*

"George, don't do that!"

"Will you get your books out please?" said Mrs Jones, the teacher, *"and quieten down!"*

It is worth noting that to report an event back does not require speech or quotation marks.

For example:

Mrs Jones told the pupils to take out their books and to quieten down.

Hyphen (-)

The hyphen is used to link words together. A single adjective made up of two or more words is called a compound adjective. The words in a compound adjective can be linked together by a hyphen (or hyphens) to show they are part of the same adjective.

For example:

- sub-part
- eighteenth-century people
- second-class post
- gender-neutral
- non-verbal
- once-in-a-lifetime experience

Brackets ()

Brackets always come in pairs () and are used to make an aside, or a point which is not part of the main flow of a sentence. If you remove the words between the brackets, the sentence should still make sense.

For example:

“The strategy (or strategies) chosen to meet the objectives may need to change as the intervention continues.”

Another example is as follows:

“We can define class as a large-scale grouping of people who share common economic resources that strongly influence the types of lifestyle they are able to lead. Ownership of wealth, together with occupation, are the chief basis of class differences. The major classes that exist in Western societies are an upper class (the wealthy, employers and industrialists, plus top executives – those who own or directly control productive resources); a middle class (which includes most white-collar workers and professionals); and a working class (those in blue-collar or manual jobs).” (Giddens, 1997, p.243)

Square Brackets [...]

A different set of square brackets [] can be used:

- to abbreviate lengthy quotations
- to correct the tense of a quotation to suit the tense of your own sentence
- to add your own words to sections of an abbreviated quotation.

To abbreviate lengthy quotations in an essay or report

“We can define class as a large-scale grouping of people who share common economic resources that strongly influence the types of lifestyle they are able to lead. Ownership of wealth, together with occupation, are the chief basis of class differences. The major classes that exist in Western societies are an upper class [...]; a middle class [...] and a working class [...].”
(Giddens, 1997, p.243)

To adjust a quotation to suit your own sentence

For example, if you were writing about class structure, you might use the following:

According to Giddens, (1997, p.243) the “[o]wnership of wealth, together with occupation, are the chief basis of class differences”.

Note, that when using square brackets, only the occasional letter as in the above example or the occasional word (for example when changing the tense of the sentence) would be placed in square brackets in this way.

Dash (—)

Not to be confused with hyphens (above), dashes are used in a similar way to brackets; to insert additional information or an aside into a sentence. The key difference between the use of dashes and the use of brackets is that dashes draw more attention to the extra information, whereas brackets tend to ‘quietly’ announce it. You can see this in the following example:

They fled through the woods, and then George — dear, sweet George, the accountant — jumped out from behind a tree and grabbed them.

A single dash can also be used to emphasise material at the beginning or end of a sentence.

For example:

After eighty years of dreaming, the elderly man realized it was time to finally revisit the land of his youth — Ireland.

Dashes – necessary, or just an informal version of the semi-colon?

Slash (/)

Many people use the slash instead of or, and etc., but this is not always helpful to the reader. There is, however, a modern convention in gender-neutral writing to use ‘s/he’.

Slashes are important symbols in web-addresses (URLs). The full URL for this page is <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/write/punctuation1.html>

Grammar: An Introduction

A sentence is a self-contained unit of meaning.

Writing is constructed by putting sentences in sequence, one after another and, if a single sentence is read aloud, it should be understandable.

Meaning should flow from one sentence to the next, carrying the argument or point of view forward in a clear and concise manner. If you do not use correct grammar and punctuation, or your sentences are too long and complex, what you are trying to say will become unclear and the reader will be unable to follow the text because the flow of meaning is interrupted.

If writing is a relatively tricky experience, or it is some time since you last wrote anything, write in fairly short, simple sentences. Aim to make one point in each sentence or paragraph if the point is more complex. If a sentence delivers two points, consider splitting it into two sentences.

Inconsistencies of grammar and mistakes in grammar blur the meaning of written work and cause confusion in the mind of the reader. They slow the reader down and distract him or her from the meaning of the sentences and the key messages contained.

Sentence Construction and nouns

A sentence is a collection of words that convey sense or meaning and is formed according to the logic of grammar.

The simplest sentence consists only of a **noun**, a naming word, and a **verb** or action word. For example, in the sentence "*Mary walked*", *Mary* is the naming noun and *walked* is the action verb.

Quick activity
Write two examples of nouns and verbs, and then combine them to form sentences.

Mary is the **proper noun** in the example sentence above but can be substituted in following sentences by the pronoun *she*. A **pronoun** is a word that can be used instead of a noun when a noun has already been mentioned. Other pronouns are *he*, *we*, *they* and *it*.

Quick activity
Write a sentence using a proper noun. Then write another using a pronoun.

Most sentences have a **subject noun** and an **object noun**. For example, consider the sentence “*Mary ate a peach*”. *Mary* is the subject noun (a person or thing performing the action of eating), and the peach is the object noun (a person or thing that has the action done to it).

Quick activity
Write two sentences using a subject noun and an object noun.

Adjectives describe nouns. Adjectives usually come before the noun.

They are sometimes known as 'describing words'. When two adjectives are used to describe one noun, they are set apart with the use of a comma.

For example:

The *lazy* dog dozed.

The *hairy, lazy* dog dozed.

Adverbs describe verbs. Traditionally, the adverb would have followed the verb, as in the examples below:

'Mary walked *slowly*'. Or, 'Peter ran away *quickly*'.

However, when you switch the position of the adverb, you notice that it doesn't affect the meaning of the sentence, so it's fine if you write 'Peter quickly ran away', 'Peter ran quickly away' and even 'Quickly, Peter ran away.'

Activity: Write a few sentences using adjectives and adverbs.

Verbs, or action words, can be expressed in tenses; past or present. The tense of a verb is its setting in time, for example:

Mary *walked* (past tense)

Mary *walks* (present tense)

However, the English language doesn't actually have a future tense, so we use a variety of ways to write/talk about things which happen in the writer's future, such as:

Mary *will walk*.

Mary *is going to walk*.

Mary walked *later that day*.

There are also other, more complex tenses not covered here. An important point is to be consistent in your use of tense. Decide whether you are explaining an event in the past, present or future and then be consistent in the use of that tense until there is a good reason for changing.

The incorrect use of tenses is one of the most common mistakes of grammar. For example, consider the following sentence:

“Marianne describes the new techniques, how they varied in approach and attitude”.

The verb *describes* is in the present tense but *varied* is in the past tense. The correct tensing of the sentence should be:

“Marianne describes the new techniques, how they vary in approach and attitude”.

Singular or Plural Words

The incorrect use of *is* and *are*, the singular and plural, is a common mistake of grammar.

Quick activity:

What is wrong with the following sentence?

“There is lots of good singers in the choir.”

The sentence should read:

“There are lots of good singers in the choir.”

Indefinite and Definite Articles

Two other items of grammar are often used erroneously – indefinite and definite articles .
A (an) is the indefinite or general article , indicating any person or thing: a boy, a horse, an anorak.
The is the definite article , indicating somebody or something specific: the girl, the beach ball.

To use *the boy* in one sentence and *a boy* in the next is confusing to the reader who will not be certain if you mean to indicate the same boy or a second boy. The reader is compelled to stop and work out the logic of the sentence and will be distracted from the message.

Contractions

In formal writing, contracted or abbreviated words such as *can't*, *couldn't* or *it's* should only be used in dialogue or directly reported speech, for example if you quote someone's work. At all other times use the full word(s) such as can not, could not or it is.

For example:

He said "*I can't swim*"

is correct because you are directly quoting speech. However, if reporting this statement you would write

"He said that he could not swim".

Conjunctions or 'Joining Words'

Words such as **and**, **or**, **but** are called conjunctions because they join parts of sentences. These are perhaps the most well-known and frequently used conjunctions but other useful 'joining words' include:

- *although*
- *however*
- *if*
- *because*
- *therefore*
- *consequently*

Words such as these are useful for simplifying and shortening sentences which are so long and complex that the reader might find them too cumbersome to comprehend.

Tips to Help with Grammar

Grammar is usually understood by common sense; it is built into the language as you learned it.

It is quite possible to use grammar effectively without knowing the rules in a formal way. Many people can hear when a collection of words is a logical sentence because it sounds complete. If there is a grammatical error the sentence will not read correctly. When listening to speech you do not have to stop and think about whether it contains a subject and a verb. Therefore, reading your finished writing aloud is a good habit to acquire.

If you find it hard to spot grammatical mistakes, try asking a friend to read your work aloud and to point them out.

If you use a computer, most have a 'grammar check' facility and any grammatical errors are automatically underlined with a blue, wavy line. If you are unsure how to correct the error, use the right click on your 'mouse' and an alternative way of writing the sentence will be displayed. However, bear in mind that the computer is not always right; use your common sense and knowledge of grammar to decide whether the computer's suggestion is acceptable.

The use of Standard English grammar is a skill that you can develop and use throughout your life. If you experience problems with grammar, you might try reading a basic grammar book, completing grammar exercises, as well as testing yourself using the various online grammar quizzes available.

skillsyouneed.com

grammar-monster.com