

How can I improve my use of the English Language



**Student Learning Development
University of Otago**

This booklet is an introduction to some of the skills and strategies that will help you successfully complete your studies at Otago.

Based on an original booklet developed by Pauline Brook and Carol Hunter for the Student Learning Development at the University of Otago.

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Coming to university from another country

Studying in another country and in a different language requires motivation, flexibility, courage, effort and a certain amount of curiosity. These attributes will help to make your experience in New Zealand and at university rewarding and enriching. Studying at university also requires getting to know how the system works in terms of what lecturers require, how the library operates and where to go for help. The following information includes some survival tips for university life, and since writing is a big part of university, we also look at some common language errors and how to avoid them.

To help you to feel part of the university environment, it's a good idea to familiarise yourself with the campus layout and the departments you're studying in to make your new experience less daunting and to build your confidence in your new environment. It's up to you to become informed, so make the most of opportunities to do so.

At university you're expected to be responsible for your own study, but there's a lot of support to help you to be an independent learner. Find out what's on offer, where to go and who to ask. Some places to start include:

- Library: subject-specific liaison librarians, resources, subject guides, computers and IT help
- Student Learning Development: conversational English groups, learning advisors, workshops, study guides, mentors
- International Office: support for international and exchange students, International Mentor Programme and Language Match

A comprehensive list of academic and social support services can be found further on in this booklet.

Being an effective learner includes knowing the course objectives for all your papers. These are usually set out at the beginning of your course information booklets (handed out in your first lecture), course readers (usually from the Print Shop, ground floor of the Central Library) or on Blackboard (access online from the university's home page, under the "for current students" tab. To access this, use your username which you get when you pick up your ID.

- Familiarise yourself with these course objectives as soon as possible so that you get a sense of the course overall and how each lecture or module fits into the "big picture."
- These objectives will also help you to prioritise your time and give focus to your study.
- Make sure you regularly attend all your lectures, labs and tutorials.

- Prepare for them by doing your assigned readings so that the class won't be your first exposure to the ideas, concepts, terms and theories covered and you'll be more likely to recognise key points, which in turn will make your in-class notes more meaningful.

What can I do to improve my English?

To improve your proficiency in English, put in plenty of practice in writing, speaking and listening. Just as you can't learn to play the piano overnight, so you can't quickly learn to write or speak well in another language. The more you immerse yourself in English, the better your English will become.

Here are some tips to improve your English:

- Mix with New Zealanders as much as possible to attune yourself to the New Zealand accent and pronunciation, listen to the news on the radio and watch some New Zealand TV, such as *Shortland Street* to become familiar with New Zealand culture, politics, laws, traditions and habits.
- Read non-academic material such as magazines and newspapers to expand your vocabulary and understanding of how the language works.
- Be open to new experiences and ways of doing things, and ask questions if you're unsure of what's required, especially in relation to your university course.
- Don't worry about making a mistake with vocabulary or pronunciation when you're speaking, and encourage your friends to correct you. Speak English whenever you can because that's how you'll learn!
- Take advantage of the Conversational English Groups and the Language Match Programme at the Student Learning Development, as well as the International Mentor Programme at the International Office. They're a great way to make friends and meet other people when you first arrive.

Proofreading Tips

Proofreading all your written work is important. The effort and attention involved is time very well spent because you'll be more likely to spot and correct any mistakes. Proofread carefully and slowly, and always from a printed copy because it's easier to see your mistakes in print than on the computer screen.

- Proofread in stages to target various aspects of your writing. For example, a first reading might focus on spelling and grammar, a second on the logical progression of your ideas, and a third on referencing. Leave a break in between readings—it's surprising what errors we see when we re-read our work a few hours or a day later. Adopting this strategy will make proofreading more manageable and effective because it's often difficult to spot all changes that need to be made in one reading.
- Identify the errors you frequently make to avoid repeating them. For example, if your tutor continually mentions that your tenses are incorrect, then you know this is a problem you need to address. Keep a list of mistakes you tend to repeat, and refer to it when proofreading your work.
- Reading your work aloud will undoubtedly help you to spot errors, as our ears hear what our eyes might miss.
- Check your spelling, punctuation, grammar, and vocabulary by using a dictionary and spell check. However, don't leave all the work to the computer spell check or grammar check as sometimes the computer will accept the spelling of a word out of context and frequently makes suggestions that are incorrect. Furthermore, it's important you understand the reasons for the corrections.
- Swap assignments with a friend. They might spot something you've missed.



The Student Learning Development also has several punctuation and grammar tip sheets available. They are available for free at the Centre, or on the website <http://www.otago.ac.nz/hedc/students/digital>

How can the Student Learning Development help?

Further assistance on writing techniques, including paragraph development and punctuation, can be found on the Student Learning Development website at slc.otago.ac.nz

- You can also make an appointment with a learning adviser regarding any aspect of your study by visiting the Student Learning Development reception.
- Proofreading is not offered at the Centre but an adviser can read a page of your work and comment on strengths and weaknesses to help you to correct and improve the remainder of your assignment. Reception does, however, have business cards available for private proofreaders.
- If you have a particular concern about certain aspects of your assignment, such as tense or the structure of your introduction or conclusion, a learning adviser will be happy to give you feedback.

The Centre also offers a range of workshops throughout both semesters, such as:

- Writing a University Essay
- Reading for Understanding
- Note-taking
- Time Management
- Exam Preparation and Techniques

These workshops are free-of-charge and are an excellent way to pick up tips and demystify the requirements of university study. For example, many students have mentioned that help with brainstorming an essay was a way forward for them because it helped them to organise their ideas, and consequently their marks improved.

Some common written errors made by students for whom English is an additional language:

- **Academic tone:** In academic writing, make sure you don't write the way you speak. Use formal language and the specialist vocabulary of the subject you're studying. Make sure spelling is correct and avoid contractions (such as *can't* for *cannot*; *don't* for *do not* etc.)
- **Verbs:** A singular noun must have a singular verb, and a plural noun must have a plural verb. For example:
 - The results of the study were published in 2007.
 - The side effects of the drug the patient has been taking for the last year are well documented.
 - His theory on increasing productivity in small provincial towns is questionable.
 - *A group of children is in the library.* (In this sentence the noun that determines the form of the main verb is *group* (singular), so the verb must be singular, *is*.)
- **Tense consistency:** In academic writing it may, in certain contexts, be OK to use either past or present tense. Even if the work you're discussing took place in the past, the ideas may be current, so the present tense can be acceptable. For example:
 - The author stated that the results confirmed his first assumptions.
 - The author states that the results confirm his first assumptions.

The important thing is to be consistent and not mix tenses inappropriately.

- **Articles:** (a, an, the) Articles can be of particular concern for many students whose first language is not English, and the best way to understand how articles are used is through reading, writing and listening. However, there are a number of useful grammar websites on this topic, and some have exercises where you fill in the missing article and receive instant feedback. For example:

www.englishpage.com/grammar/Articles/Exercises/

www.grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/

www.edufind.com/english/grammar/grammar_topics.php

- **Prepositions:** Some verbs are always accompanied by a preposition. If you're unsure whether a preposition is required or not, check in a dictionary. Keep a note of the preposition that normally goes with a verb or noun. The following examples demonstrate the care needed in deciding whether or not a verb needs a preposition, and if so, which preposition is correct
 - The study focuses on 50 post-graduate students. (Verb)
 - **But:** This will really focus your attention.
 - Postgraduate students were the focus of the study. (Noun)
 - His poor examples detract from his argument. (Verb)
 - The link to the website is obtained by clicking on the icon. (Obtained by plus verb)
 - Eggs are obtained from hens. (Obtained from plus noun)

- Be careful about the use of prepositions regarding time. For example:
 - **In** December ... (No specified date)
 - **On** 28 December ... (Specified date)
 - **At** 12.30 ... (Specified time)
 - **On** Tuesday ... (Specified time)
 - **In** two days' time ... (Future time)
 - **In** summer ... (No specified date)
 - **In** 2013 ... (No specified date but a specified year)

Speakers from other language backgrounds frequently puzzle over prepositions related to space or locations. Unfortunately, there are no hard and fast rules on why certain prepositions are used at certain times: in the English language, a lot cannot be explained by rules but just by common usage. For example, all the following uses are correct.

- She lives **on** the Taieri.
- She lives **out at** Warrington.
- She lives **in** North Dunedin.
- He lives **at** Waverley.
- She lives **at** 45 Pacific St.
- He lives **in** Pacific St.
- He studies **at** the Library every Sunday.
- She studies **in** the Library when her flat is too noisy.
- I'll meet you **in** the Octagon.
- I'll meet you **at** the movies.
- He lives **in** a flat.

- I met her **in** Wellington.
 - I found the cat **in** Flower St.
 - I found the cat **at** 55 Flower Street.
 - She works **in** a factory.
 - She works **at** United Builders.
 - She works **for** United Builders.
- **Many vs Much:** ‘Many’ is used with a countable noun and ‘much’ is used with a non-countable noun. Test the sentence by asking yourself whether the noun is countable or non-countable.
- The student hasn’t made many grammatical mistakes in this essay. (Countable)
 - There isn’t much milk left. (Non-countable)
- **Number vs Amount:** ‘Number’ is used with a countable noun, and ‘amount’ is used with a non-countable noun. Test the sentence by asking yourself whether the noun is countable or non-countable.
- There are a vast number of issues associated with the school’s closure. (Countable)
 - You should see the amount of sugar he puts in his tea! (Non-countable)
- **Synonyms:** Many words, which might have similar dictionary definitions, are not necessarily interchangeable. The synonyms in a thesaurus imply that you can use one word or the other, but this is not always the case as different words have different shades of meaning in different contexts. In the following examples the underlined words have a similar meaning but cannot be interchanged.

modify/soften

You can modify or soften your approach.

You can also modify your bathroom but you can’t soften it.

model/dummy

We talk about an economic model and a designer’s model, but while we can say designer’s dummy (for the position of illustrations on a page) we can’t say economic dummy.

concerted/tough/arduous

He made a concerted attempt and a tough decision. Here, ‘concerted’ means planned or arranged and ‘tough’ means difficult or troublesome. The arduous conditions in the mountains left him exhausted. Here ‘arduous’ means difficult to

endure or harsh.

OR

The tough conditions in the mountains left him exhausted. Here ‘tough’ means difficult to deal with, but we can’t say concerted conditions.

- **‘Of’ or an apostrophe?:** Once again, this area of the language can be tricky. It’s difficult to explain why sometimes it’s OK to use the preposition ‘of’, while sometimes it’s preferable to use the possessive case (i.e. noun followed by an apostrophe), or then again, why sometimes either is OK. In the following examples only the first of each pair of sentences is incorrect.

Common Mistake	Correction
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The bag of Jan. (Possesive)• The shirt of the boy is blue• The cat of John went missing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Jan’s bag.• The boy’s shirt is blue• John’s cat went missing.

But in the following examples, either ‘of’ or an apostrophe is OK:

- The author’s remarks are controversial.
- The remarks of the author are controversial.
- The character’s personality is highlighted in Act 4 of the play.
- The personality of the character is highlighted in Act 4 of the play.
- The book’s ending was disappointing.
- The ending of the book was disappointing.

- **Plurals:** Some noun forms are the same whether singular or plural.
 - Yesterday I saw a black sheep.
 - There were eighty sheep in the paddock.
 - My research is about women’s role in the World War II Resistance movement.
 - Smith has conducted a lot of research into the migratory habits of this rare bird.
 - Yesterday he caught a large fish.
 - Many fish died because of the oil slick.

- **Frequently confused words:** Some English words sound the same but have a different meaning, while others sound almost the same but have a different meaning. For example: cite/sight/site, and affect/effect.
 - *When referencing it is important to cite the publication date.* (Verb)
 - *I caught a brief sight of him yesterday in the supermarket.* (Noun: glimpse or view)
 - *This archeological site still holds hidden treasures.* (Noun: place)
 - *Her lack of consultation affects him greatly.* (Verb)
 - *Rising petrol costs have had a significant effect on the company's profits.*
(Noun).
 - However, *effect* can also be a verb when it means to *bring about*:
 - *The university must effect changes immediately.*

Exercises

Correct the following sentences, and then refer to the answers on the following page.

1. Contrary with my expectations he arrived early.
2. Oranges in the bowl are from California.
3. I have an appointment with my tutor 12.30.
4. The computer system of the Library is being upgraded.
5. His speech made an big impact for the audience.
6. She's made much mistakes in this test.
7. Many of the researches are inconclusive.
8. He arrived at Australia May 14.
9. I can't count the amount of times I've asked him to tidy his room.
10. 1983 they moved in New Caledonia.
11. He hasn't written much words.
12. Building standards have to comply to the new regulations introduced last month.
13. A pile of books were left on the desk.
14. These figures don't correlate to the ones you gave me yesterday.
15. A small amount of people attended the Open Lecture.
16. I bought less books than my sister.
17. How much times has he checked his email?
18. The results of his experiment is in the latest journal.
19. Her study on the affects of passive smoking on newborn babies has recently been published.
20. There is still a considerable amount of people who haven't registered for the conference.
21. A mountain of discarded computers were visible from the roadside.
22. He's always been averse with hard work.
23. I spoke to class representative yesterday.
24. The current weather isn't conducive for planting spring bulbs.
25. The folder of the student is in the study room.

Answers

1. Contrary to my expectations he arrived early.
2. The oranges in the bowl are from California.
3. I have an appointment with my tutor at 12.30.
4. The Library's computer system is being upgraded OR The computer system in/at the Library is being upgraded.
5. His speech made a big impact on the audience.
6. She's made many mistakes in this test.
7. Much of the research is inconclusive.
8. He arrived in Australia on May 14.
9. I can't count the number of times I've asked him to tidy his room.
10. In 1983 they moved to New Caledonia.
11. He hasn't written many words.
12. Building standards have to comply with the new regulations introduced last month.
13. A pile of books was left on the desk.
14. These figures don't correlate with the ones you gave me yesterday.
15. A small number of people attended the Open Lecture.
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19. Her study on the effects of passive smoking on newborn babies has recently been published.
20. There are still a considerable number of people who haven't registered for the conference.
21. A mountain of discarded computers was visible from the roadside.
22. He's always been averse to hard work.
23. I spoke to the/my class representative yesterday.
24. The current weather isn't conducive to planting spring bulbs.
25. The student's folder is in the study room.

Academic and social support

The following is some of the support the University offers. More information can be obtained from the University's website www.otago.ac.nz or the Otago University Students' Association (OUSA) www.ousa.co.nz

Student Learning Development: Ground Floor, Central Library Building. See the Student Learning Development for workshops and individual consultations about study skills and effective learning techniques. On-line information is also available regarding note-taking, effective reading, essay writing, time management and exam preparation. Visit slc.otago.ac.nz

Peer Support Programme: Match up with a 'mentor' to help you to integrate into university life. Check the details on the Student Learning Development website or contact the Student Learning Development reception.

Conversational English Groups: Held during both semesters and facilitated by a 'Kiwi'. More information about these groups, including timetables, can be found at the Student Learning Development.

International Student Support: Archway West, 90 Union Place East (the smaller stone building perpendicular to the clock tower building) or visit www.otago.ac.nz/international/. The International Office can advise on issues particular to international students or can refer you to the appropriate service.

Language Match: A language exchange service run by the Student Learning Development. Look online or come in to find out more today

Disabilities Information and Support Office: Ground floor, Central Library Building or visit www.otago.ac.nz/disabilities. This service offers learning support and provides advice, information, and a number of specific resources for those with disabilities.

Student Computing Services (ITS): Ground floor, Central Library building or visit www.otago.ac.nz/its/students. Services include on-line IT support regarding personal and University computing and tip-sheets for software packages. If you need to show someone a problem or ask a question, approach a tutor-supervisor wearing a yellow IT jacket in the Central Library.

Library Services: Information and Help Desks for assistance with catalogues, library databases, research techniques, and referencing. Visit www.otago.ac.nz/library

Degree structure; major/minor requirements: Divisional Offices consist of departments and/or professional programmes as first contact. Visit: www.otago.ac.nz/business
www.otago.ac.nz/healthsciences
www.otago.ac.nz/humanities
www.otago.ac.nz/sciences

Course coordinators: In departments for advice on course content and requirements, and assignments.

Lecturers and tutors: They have office hours for consultations with individual students. The time will be noted either in your course material or displayed on their office door.

Student Health and Counselling: Corner of Walsh and Albany Streets. This service offers help for medical and counselling issues, as well as information on a healthy lifestyle programme. Visit www.otago.ac.nz/studenthealth

OUSA (Otago University Students' Association): Student advocacy, lost property, concert tickets, clubs and events.

OUSA Recreation Centre: Here you can find all the clubs, classes, tournaments and recreation activities offered. A great way to improve your language is to take up a class (offerings vary from jewellery making to rapier sword fighting), or join a group. The tramping club is always popular with internationals, but there are also groups for different nationalities (Malaysian, Indian, Saudi and Sri Lankan Students associations, to name a few) or do a recreation activity, such as horse riding, rock climbing, kayaking or water polo.