

ACADEMIC SUPPORT CENTRE

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St. Lawrence College



ESL GUIDE TO  
BETTER WRITING

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ACADEMIC SUPPORT CENTRE

# ESL Guide to Better Writing

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# Sentence Fragments

*What happens if you drop a glass on the floor? The glass will break into many small pieces or fragments. The glass will no longer hold any water because it is not complete. A sentence can also be a fragment.*

A complete sentence must have three things: a subject, a verb, and a complete idea. The subject is the person or thing doing the action or the verb. How do we know a sentence is “complete” or not? Let’s go through each of the three parts of a sentence.



(1) **Missing Subject:** Every sentence must have a subject. The subject can be a person or thing.

⊗ **Bought a textbook at the college bookstore.** (Who bought the book? The sentence is missing a subject.)

⊗ **During the reading week.** (What happened during the reading week? Who or what was the subject?)

✓ **Log off the computer, please.** (Where’s is the subject? It’s an order or command so the subject “you” is implied, meaning the subject is there but you don’t see it.)

(2) **Missing Verb:** Every sentence must have a subject. The verb tells us what the subject is or does.

⊗ **The debate about in City Hall.** (What about the debate? The verb is missing.)

⊗ **The email that he sent.** (Isn’t “sent” the verb? It is for the subject “he” in the adjective clause. But there is not verb for the subject “email”.)

⊗ **The library technician helping students.** (“helping” looks like the verb, but it is missing “is” to complete the present progressive verb tense.)

(3) **Incomplete Idea:** A group of words that have both a subject and a verb is called a **clause**. There are two types of clauses: independent and dependent.

**Independent clauses** are complete sentences.

✓ St. Lawrence College has three campuses.

**Dependent clauses**, however, are not complete sentences. They *depend on* another clause to complete the sentence.

✗ Because St. Lawrence College has three campuses. (By adding “because” to our previous example, we have made an incomplete sentence or sentence fragment.)

To fix this sentence fragment, we need to add another clause.

✓ Because St. Lawrence College has three campuses, students can choose a variety of programs.

Words like “because” are called subordinating conjunctions. Here are some of the most common subordinating conjunctions: **after, although, as, when, while, until, because, before, if, since** (or AAAWWUBBIS to help you remember). See **Appendix A: Subordinating Conjunctions** for a list of more subordinating conjunctions.



## Exercises

For the following groups of words, identify them as correct (C) or incorrect (IC). For the incorrect sentences, correct them.

1. St. Lawrence College offers more than 100 full-time programs. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Several of the programs in January, February and May. \_\_\_\_\_
3. The college has about 6,700 full-time students. \_\_\_\_\_
4. Opened on September 1969. \_\_\_\_\_
5. After students graduate from college. \_\_\_\_\_



## Online Resources

The site Chomp Chomp has more detailed explanation of sentence fragments and many more exercises.

<http://www.chompchomp.com/rules/fragrules.htm>

<http://www.chompchomp.com/exercises.htm#Fragments>

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# Run-on Sentences

*Have you ever run so fast that when you tried to stop, you slid on the floor? The same thing can happen to your writing. You're writing and writing and instead of stopping at the end of the sentence, you continue onto the next sentence without break. This error is known as a run-on sentence.*

**i** Every complete sentence has a subject, a verb, and a complete idea (as known as an **independent clause**). Sometimes we incorrectly link two complete sentences. There are two kinds of run-on sentences:

(1) **Comma Splices:** When two independent clauses are joined by just a comma, it is a comma splice error. The easiest way to fix comma splices is to replace the comma with a period.

⊗ **Kingston is a city in Eastern Ontario, it is on the eastern end of Lake Ontario.** (The two independent clauses here are joined by only a comma.)

⊗ **Students can exercise their bodies at the Student Health Athletic Centre (SHAC), they can exercise their minds in Davies Hall.** (Can you identify the two independent clauses, each with its own subject and verb?)

✓ **Kingston is a city in Eastern Ontario. It is on the eastern end of Lake Ontario.** (The period is your friend for comma splices.)

✓ **Students can exercise their bodies at the Student Health Athletic Centre (SHAC), and they can exercise their minds in Davies Hall.** (You can also use a coordinating conjunction in addition to the comma to combine the two independent clauses.)

See **Appendix: Coordinating Conjunctions** for a list of all of the coordinating conjunctions.

(2) **Fused Sentence:** This type of run-on error occurs when two complete sentences are joined without any punctuation at all. The easiest way to fix them is to use the period.

⊗ **Each year, St. Lawrence College welcomes hundreds of international students they come from more than 40 countries and counting.** (Two complete clauses without a period or conjunction)

⊗ **The students booked a group study room they studied together for two hours.**



## Exercises

For the following groups of words, identify them as correct (C) or incorrect (IC). For the incorrect sentences, correct them.

1. The cafeteria serves pizza, it also has Tim Hortons. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Kingston is an old historical city Fort Henry is popular with tourists. \_\_\_\_\_
3. St. Lawrence College offers more than 100 full-time programs, and it has about 6,700 full-time students. \_\_\_\_\_
4. Students can use their student cards to use the photocopiers printing from computers is also easy. \_\_\_\_\_
5. Smoking is prohibited anywhere on campus, the college is designated as smoke-free zone. \_\_\_\_\_
6. Thank you for visiting us at Timmies, we appreciate it! (This was found on a sign on the counter of Tim Hortons in the cafeteria.)



## Online Resources

The site Chomp Chomp has more detailed explanation of comma splices and fused sentences and many exercises to practice.

### Comma Splice

<http://chompchomp.com/terms/commasplice.htm>

### Fused Sentence

<http://chompchomp.com/terms/fusedsentence.htm>

### Exercises

<http://chompchomp.com/csfs01/>

# Subject-Verb Agreement

*If you bought a car and it only had one tire, would you buy it? Probably not. How about two tires? No? Two tires would work on a motorcycle, but a car requires four tires. The same goes for **subject and verb**. They must agree in number and point of view.*

**i** Before we learn about subject-verb agreement errors, we first must understand more about the subject. The subject can be singular or plural and have a point of view.

- (1) **Singular or Plural:** When the subject is singular, it means it is one person or thing. A plural subject means two or more people or things.
- (2) **Point of View:** There are three points of view: first person (I, we), second person (you), and third person (he, she, they).

When we conjugate the verb, we must consider if the subject is singular/plural and the point of view. Here is a chart to summarize how to conjugate the regular verb *floccinaucinihilipilificate*.

Point of View	Singular	Plural
First Person	I floccinaucinihilipilificate*	We floccinaucinihilipilificate
Second Person	You floccinaucinihilipilificate	You floccinaucinihilipilificate
Third Person	He/She/It floccinaucinihilipilificates	They floccinaucinihilipilificate

\* *to describe, estimate or regard something as worthless.*

Careful: The third-person singular has an “s” at the end.

**Irregular verbs**, those verbs that not simply have an “s” or “es” at the end, can be found in the [Appendix: Irregular Verbs](#).

Here are some special cases or “traps” that can catch you.

(1) **Not all verbs come right after the subject:** Look at the noun before the **preposition**: Prepositions, such as *for, of, at, in* can hide the true subject.

⊗ **One of the students speak Spanish.** (Is “students” the subject? No, it’s “one”.)

✓ **One of the students speaks Spanish.** (The verb takes the singular case of the subject.)

⊗ **The smoke of the summer campfires rise above the cabins.** (Is “campfires” the subject of the verb “rise”? No, look before the preposition “of”.)

✓ **The smoke of the summer campfires rises above the cabins.** (The singular subject “smoke” agrees with the verb “rises”.)

(2) **Subjects ending in -one, -thing, or -body are always singular.**

⊗ **Everybody in the gymnasium were cheering for the Vikings basketball team.** (“Everybody” is singular, but “were” is for plural subjects.)

✓ **Everybody in the gymnasium was cheering for the Vikings basketball team.** (“was” is the singular form of the verb.)

(3) For **correlative conjunctions**, such as *either...or...*, *neither...nor...*, the subject closest to the verb is used to conjugate the verb.

⊗ **Neither the students nor the teacher know about the cancelled class.** (The subject closest to the verb “know” is “teacher”.)

✓ **Neither the students nor the teacher knows about the cancelled class.**

See [Appendix: Correlative Conjunctions](#) for a list of other correlative conjunctions.

**(4) Prepositional Phrases:** Phrases that follow the subject and beginning with words such as *with, like, as well as, together with, in addition to, including*, seem to be adding to the subject, but they usually found in parenthetical phrase, they are considered part of the subject.

⊗ **My student success facilitator, along with my parents, have advised me to change my program.** (The subject is the singular “facilitator”, not the facilitator and parents.)

✓ **My student success facilitator, along with my parents, has advised me to change my program.**



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Worried about how to study effectively? Not sure who to talk to about finances? Wondering how to cope with learning lots of new material? **Student Success Facilitators** (SSF) provide support and resources to help you achieve your academic and personal goals.

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### Exercises

For the following groups of words, underline the subject and the verb. Then, identify them as correct (C) or incorrect (IC). For the incorrect sentences, correct them.

1. No one in Canada admits to hating hockey; the Toronto Maple Leafs, yes, but hockey, no. \_\_\_\_\_
2. It's your choice, but either of the programs look like a good match for you. \_\_\_\_\_
3. There are more than 100 full-time programs at the college. \_\_\_\_\_
4. The President of the college, Glenn Vollebregt, in addition to the other members of the executive, have discussed the new strategic plan. \_\_\_\_\_
5. Papa John's Pizza, Tim Hortons, and Pita Pit are some of fast food venues that are available in the cafeteria. \_\_\_\_\_



### Online Resources

The site Grammar Book has more detailed explanation of subject-verb agreement (10 Rules). More exercises can be found at Chomp Chomp.

#### Learn

<https://www.grammarbook.com/grammar/subjectVerbAgree.asp>

## Exercises

[http://chompchomp.com/exercises.htm#Subject-Verb\\_Agreement](http://chompchomp.com/exercises.htm#Subject-Verb_Agreement)

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# Verb Tenses

*Time is said to be relative. For some people, a day feels like a week; for others a year feels like a decade. In other words, time is subjective. Unfortunately, the use of verb tenses is not subjective and has its own rules. Luckily, in academic writing, if you focus on mastering four verb tenses, you'll be saving yourself a lot of time.*

**i** **T**he four most common verb tenses are the **simple present**, **simple past**, **present perfect**, and the **future**.

**(1) Simple Present:** This verb tense describes habitual action or general truths or facts. Common signal words associated with this tense include *every day*, *weekly*, *always*, *often*, or *usually*.

✓ **The Campus Health Centre offers a walk-in service Monday to Friday, from 8 am to 4 pm.** (The sentence describes a habitual or regular action.)

✓ **All of the residences on the three campuses have fully furnished single- or double-occupancy suites.** (It's true.)

✓ **Kingston is a city in Eastern Ontario. It is on the eastern end of Lake Ontario.** (This is a fact. About 35% of Canada's population live in Southern Ontario!)

**(2) Simple Past:** This verb tense describes a completed action at a specific time in the past. Some signal words include *ago*, *last*, *yesterday*, *on* or *in* (followed by a specific date or time).

✓ **In September 1969, St. Lawrence College held its very first classes in Kingston.** ("In" followed by a specific date is a signal that the verb tense will be simple past.)

✓ **Silfab, the largest manufacturer of solar modules in North America, partnered with St. Lawrence College's Sustainable Energy Applied Research Centre to test the performance of solar modules.** (This happened in the past.)

**(3) Present Perfect:** This verb tense describes an event that happen in an unspecified time in the past. Unlike the simple past tense, the present perfect tense focuses more on the fact that something happened and that the event is connected to the present. Signal words include *for, since, just, already, yet, still, so far,* and *up to now*.

✔ Many researchers **have studied** the benefits of learning a foreign language people. They **found** people who speak more than one language **have improved memory, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, and enhanced concentration.** (A common pattern is to introduce a topic using present perfect and then go into specifics using the simple past tense.)

✔ **Throughout Kingston’s history, we have always had a vibrant nightlife.** (In the past, people went to “penny gaffs”, temporary theaters that entertained people for a penny. Now, we have concerts at the Leon’s Centre.)



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For more information about Kingston’s nightlife, go to <https://www.visitkingston.ca/eat-drink/pubs-nightlife/>

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✔ **We’ve always been a city steeped in history yet always changing.** (Notice the contraction of “have” as “ve” and the placement of the adverb “always” in between.)

To understand more about the differences between the simple past and present perfect verb tenses, refer to the chart in the **Appendix: Simple Past or Present Perfect**.



## Exercises

For the following sentences, change the base form of the verb to its correct tense.

*Example:* Yesterday, I (floccinaucinihilipilificate) \_\_\_\_\_ an essay of a classmate.

Yesterday, I **floccinaucinihilipilificated** an essay of a classmate. (simple past tense)

1. Every Monday, Jeff (take) \_\_\_\_\_ the bus number 3 to the college.
2. The presentation booklets (be normally) \_\_\_\_\_ printed at the Copy Centre in the Student Association.
3. For nearly 50 years, St. Lawrence College (be) \_\_\_\_\_ a vital part of communities in Eastern Ontario.

4. Total enrolment in Canada's elementary and secondary schools (decline)\_\_\_\_\_ as much as 500,000 in the next 15 years.

5. In February 2013, St. Lawrence College (begin) \_\_\_\_\_developing the new strategic plan called Our Future.



### **Online Resources**

The English Page site has more detailed explanation of the verb tenses followed by many exercises to practice.

#### **Simple Present**

<https://www.englishpage.com/verbpage/simplepresent.html>

#### **Simple Past**

<https://www.englishpage.com/verbpage/simplepast.html>

#### **Present Perfect**

<https://www.englishpage.com/verbpage/presentperfect.html>

#### **Future**

<https://www.englishpage.com/verbpage/simplefuture.html>

#### **Simple Past vs. Present Perfect**

<https://www.englishpage.com/verbpage/verbs5.html>

# Articles

*They're three of the shortest words in the English language. But they bring fear to the heart of the most advanced English learner. Three little words that take a second to recognize, but a lifetime to master. We're talking about the articles: **a, the, an**. On the website English Pages, it outlines 25 different uses of these articles! We'll cover the basics here to start you on your long and treacherous journey of understanding articles.*

**i** Articles are adjectives because they go in front of a noun to modify it. There are two kinds of articles: indefinite (a, an) and definite (the) articles.

**(1) Indefinite Articles:** Articles, a and an, refer to a **countable noun** that is not specific. For example, when I say, "I want a pen" or "I need an apple," I don't mean a specific pen or apple in mind. Any pen or ukulele will do.

**Countable or Uncountable Noun:** A countable noun is a noun that can be counted, while an uncountable noun cannot be counted. To test, we can put a number in front of the noun. For example, we can write, "four pens" or "three ukuleles" but we cannot write, "four milk" or "two rain."

**A or An?** The article "a" is used when the countable noun that follows is a consonant *and* has a consonant sound, while "an" is used before a countable noun that starts with a vowel *and* has a vowel sound.

✓ **St. Lawrence College is an integral part of the economic life and social fabric of Eastern Ontario.** (The article "an" is used in front of a noun that starts with a vowel. St. Lawrence College is one of many parts that make up the economic and social aspects of Eastern Ontario.)

✗ **Toastmasters, an educational organization, offers a hour-long workshop on improving your presentation skills.** (The first indefinite article is correct because the word that follows starts with a vowel "e". The second article is incorrect. Although "hour" does start with a consonant, the "h" is silent and so it is the "o" that we consider. It should be rewritten as "an hour-long workshop.")

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For more information about how you can improve your confidence in public speaking, go to <https://www.toastmasters.org/>

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(2) **Definite article:** “The” is used when referring to a specific noun that both reader and writer can recognize or that it was mentioned previously, usually with an indefinite article. In other words, if you use “the”, you are assuming that the reader or listener knows what you are referring to.

✔ **By its tenth year, St. Lawrence College was a strong and creative force. Today, after 50 years in existence, the College continues to evolve to meet the needs of students seeking the skills that will lead to a better quality of life.** (The first article, the indefinite article refers to a “strong and creative force.” The “the” before “College” is referring to specifically to St. Lawrence College. Notice how “College” is capitalized, which reinforces the fact that we are again talking about St. Lawrence College.



## Exercises

For the following groups of words, identify them as correct (C) or incorrect (IC). For the incorrect sentences, correct them.

1. The cafeteria serves pizza, it also has Tim Hortons. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Kingston is an old historical city Fort Henry is popular with tourists. \_\_\_\_\_
3. St. Lawrence College offers more than 100 full-time programs, and it has about 6,700 full-time students. \_\_\_\_\_
4. Students can use their student cards to use the photocopiers printing from computers is also easy. \_\_\_\_\_
5. Smoking is prohibited anywhere on campus, the college is designated as smoke-free zone. \_\_\_\_\_
6. Thank you for visiting us at Timmies, we appreciate it! (This was found on a sign on the counter of Tim Hortons in the cafeteria.)



## Online Resources

The site Chomp Chomp has more detailed explanation of comma splices and fused sentences and many exercises to practice.

Comma Splice

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