



The Language of College

A Reading, Writing & Communication Toolkit

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Contents

College words

[College Terms You Will Hear in Your First Weeks](#)

Understand the assignment

[Understanding a Writing Prompt](#)

[Task Verbs: Analyze, Compare, Evaluate](#)

[Reading a Rubric](#)

Take part in class

[Writing a Discussion Post](#)

[Replying to Classmates](#)

[Writing a Journal or Reflection](#)

[Interacting in Class: Common Expectations](#)

Read college texts

[Using Context Clues](#)

[Unpacking a Long Sentence](#)

Write

[Building a Paragraph](#)

[Sentences That Say What You Mean](#)

Grammar for college writing

[Articles: A, An, The](#)

[Subject-Verb Agreement](#)

[Verb Tense: Staying Consistent](#)

[Sentence Boundaries: Fragments and Run-ons](#)

Revise and use feedback

[Understanding Instructor Feedback](#)

Use sources

[Quote, Paraphrase, or Summarize](#)

Ask for help

[Emailing an Instructor and Asking Questions](#)

[Working with a Tutor](#)

Tools and AI

[Translation, Grammar Tools, and AI: Check the Rules First](#)

[Using AI to Learn](#)

[Keeping a Record of Your Writing Process](#)

College Life

[Feeling at Home in College](#)

[Balancing School, Work, and Family](#)

[Making Connections](#)

[Different Schools, Different Expectations](#)

[Speaking Up and Being Understood](#)

[When Things Feel Hard](#)

Instructor Companion

[Writing a Clear Assignment Prompt](#)

[Setting Expectations for Discussions and Journals](#)

[Assignment Prompt Builder](#)

[Rubrics and Where Language Accuracy Fits](#)

[Focused, Actionable Feedback](#)

[Setting Expectations for Translation, Grammar Tools, and AI](#)

[Talking About Writing Process and Authorship](#)

[Knowing Your Students' Language Backgrounds](#)

[Terms for Language Learners: What to Use, and When](#)

College words

COLLEGE WORDS

College Terms You Will Hear in Your First Weeks

Use this page when you see a word in your syllabus, in Blackboard, or in class that you do not know.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/words/college-terms.html>

Why these words matter

In your first weeks, instructors and staff use many words that are special to college. They may not explain them, because they use them every day. Knowing these words helps you read your syllabus, follow announcements, and ask clear questions.

This page groups common terms by where you will meet them. You do not need to learn them all today. Come back to the page when you see a word you do not know.

RULES CAN BE DIFFERENT IN EACH COURSE

This page gives general meanings. The exact rules, such as how late work is graded or how to drop a class, are in your syllabus or come from your advisor. When a rule matters, check there.

Words about your courses

Course words

Word	Meaning
syllabus	The document that explains a course: its schedule, rules, grading, and how to contact the instructor. Read it in the first week.
semester, term	The period of time when a course meets, such as Fall or Spring.
section	One group of students in a course. The same course can have several sections, at different times or online.
credit hour	The unit that measures a course. Most courses are three credit hours. Your degree requires a certain number of them.
full-time, part-time	How many credit hours you take in a semester. The number for full-time can matter for financial aid. Ask your advisor.
prerequisite	A course you must finish before you can take another course.
corequisite	A course you must take at the same time as another course.

Word	Meaning
drop, withdraw	To leave a course. When you leave affects your grade and your money. Talk to your advisor first.
advisor	A person who helps you choose courses and plan your degree.
Blackboard	The website where your courses live: assignments, grades, announcements, and messages.

Words about assignments and grades

Assignment and grade words

Word	Meaning
assignment	A piece of work your instructor asks you to do, such as an essay, a quiz, or a discussion post.
prompt, directions	The instructions for an assignment. See Understanding a writing prompt .
due date	The day and time when an assignment must be turned in.
late work	Work turned in after the due date. Each instructor has a rule for it. Find it in the syllabus.
rubric	A chart that shows how an assignment will be graded. See Reading a rubric .
participation	Taking an active part in class. It is often part of the grade.
attendance	Being present in class. In an online class, it can mean logging in and doing the work each week.
GPA	Grade point average. One number that shows your average grade in all your courses.
academic integrity	Doing your own work honestly, and giving credit when you use other people's words or ideas.
plagiarism	Using someone else's words or ideas without giving them credit. Colleges treat it as a serious problem.

Words about places and help

Places and help

Word	Meaning
office hours	Times when an instructor is available to meet with students. Some instructors call them student hours. Every student is welcome.
Teaching and Learning Center (TLC)	OCTC's free tutoring and writing help center. See This semester for hours.

Word	Meaning
tutor	A person who helps you with coursework outside of class. See Working with a tutor .
library	A place for books, articles, and research help, in person and online. OCTC Library (https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/current-students/student-resources/library/index.aspx)
library database	An online collection of articles and books that the library pays for. You use it to find reliable sources.

Example: terms in a syllabus

Here is part of a syllabus. Each number matches a note below.

Part of a syllabus, with notes

Prerequisite: ENG 101. **1** This is a three-credit-hour course. **2**

Late work: I accept late work for up to three days, with 10 percent off each day. **3** Office hours: Tuesday and Thursday, 1 to 2 p.m., or by appointment. **4**

All work must follow the college's academic integrity policy. **5**

1 Prerequisite.

You must finish ENG 101 before you can take this course.

2 Credit hours.

This course counts for three credit hours toward your degree.

3 Late work.

This instructor's rule. Another instructor may have a different one.

4 Office hours.

You can come at these times without an appointment. **By appointment** means you can also ask for another time.

5 Academic integrity.

Do your own work honestly, and give credit to your sources.

Language focus: verb phrases you will hear in college

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Two-word verbs

English often uses a verb + a small word such as in, up, or for to make a new meaning. These are called **phrasal verbs**. The meaning of the pair can be different from the meaning of each word.

Phrasal verbs in college

Phrase	Meaning	Example
turn in, hand in	submit	Turn in your essay in Blackboard.
sign up for	register for	I signed up for a tutoring session.
make up	do missed work later	Can I make up the quiz?
fall behind	not keep up with the schedule	I fell behind in the second week.
catch up	reach the schedule again	I need to catch up on the reading.
look over	read quickly to check	Please look over my outline.
drop out	leave school completely	She did not drop out; she dropped one class.

WATCH FOR THIS

Drop a class means leaving one course. Drop out means leaving college. The small word out changes the meaning.

Sentence starters

Use these when you meet a word you do not know. Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO ASK ABOUT A WORD

What does _____ mean in the syllabus?

Could you explain what _____ means for this course?

TO ASK ABOUT A RULE

What is the rule for _____ in this class?

If I _____, what should I do?

Practice

1. A course lists “**Prerequisite: MAT 110.**” You have not taken MAT 110. Can you take the course now?

2. Where do you find your instructor's rule for late work?
3. Choose the correct phrase: "I was sick, so I need to (make up / turn in) the quiz."
4. What is the difference between drop a class and drop out?

Suggested answers

1. No, in most cases.

A prerequisite must be finished first. If you think you have equal experience, ask your advisor.

2. In the syllabus.

Each instructor sets the rule, so it can be different in each course.

3. make up

You missed the quiz, so you need to do it later. Turn in means submit.

4. Leaving one course, or leaving college.

Drop a class means leaving one course. Drop out means leaving school completely.

Next step

Try this with your syllabus

1. Open the syllabus for one of your courses.
2. Find five words from this page.
3. Find one word that is not on this page, and ask your instructor or a tutor what it means.

Related pages

[Understanding a writing prompt](#)

How to read the directions for an assignment.

[Interacting in class: common expectations](#)

What instructors and classmates usually expect.

[Emailing an instructor and asking questions](#)

How to ask what a word or a rule means.

Understand the assignment

UNDERSTAND THE ASSIGNMENT

Understanding a Writing Prompt

Use this page when your instructor gives you a writing assignment and you want to be sure what it asks you to do.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/assignments/writing-prompt.html>

What a prompt tells you

A **writing prompt** is the set of instructions for a writing assignment. Your grade depends on doing what the prompt asks, so read it slowly, at least two times, before you start to write.

Good writers at every level sometimes answer a different question than the one the prompt asked. A careful reading prevents that. As you read, look for the answers to five questions.

- 1 What do I do?** Find the task verb, such as explain, compare, or argue.
- 2 What do I write about?** Find the topic and any limits on the topic.
- 3 Who is my reader?** Some prompts name a reader. If the prompt does not, write for a reader who has not taken your class.
- 4 What are the requirements?** Find the length, the number of sources, and the format.
- 5 How do I finish?** Find the due date, the place to submit your work, and how it will be graded.

If the prompt does not answer one of these questions, ask your instructor. That is a normal and useful question.

KEY TERMS

Writing prompt: the instructions for a writing assignment.

Task verb: the verb that names the kind of thinking and writing you must do.

Rubric: a chart that shows how your work will be graded.

Example: reading a prompt closely

Here is a prompt from a first-year writing course. Six phrases are highlighted. Each number matches a note below the prompt.

Essay 2: A Change Worth Making

Think of **one problem at your workplace, in your neighborhood, or at this college.** **1** Write an essay that **argues for one specific change** **2** that would improve the situation. Your readers are **the people who could make that change,** **3** so explain the problem clearly and give reasons they would accept.

Support your argument with evidence from **at least two credible sources.** **4** Your essay should be **750–1,000 words in MLA format.** **5** Submit your essay in Blackboard by the due date listed there. **See the rubric** **6** for how this essay will be graded.

1 The topic, with a choice.

You choose the problem. The word **or** tells you to choose one of the three places, not all three.

2 The task.

The task verb is **argues**. To argue is to state your position and give reasons for it. Describing the problem is not enough. The words **one specific** set a limit: write about one change, and say exactly what it is.

3 The reader.

You are writing to people who have the power to make the change. Ask yourself what they already know and what reasons matter to them.

4 A requirement with a number.

At least two means two or more. One source is too few. **Credible** means that readers can trust the source.

5 Length and format.

Your essay needs between 750 and 1,000 words. MLA is a set of rules for how a paper looks and how it names its sources. The word **should** is a requirement here. See the language focus below.

6 How you will be graded.

The rubric shows what your instructor will look for. Read it before you write, not after.

TIP

Now answer the five questions for this prompt. If you can answer all five in your own words, you understand the assignment.

Language focus: required, allowed, or not allowed

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Commands

Prompts often start a sentence with a verb: **Write an essay. Support your argument. Submit your essay.** These sentences are commands. They have no subject because the subject is always you. In a prompt, a command is not rude. It is a requirement.

Small words that change the meaning

Words such as **must**, **should**, and **may** tell you how much choice you have.

Words that show what is required

Words in the prompt	What they mean	Example
must need to are required to	Required.	You must name every source you use.
should are expected to	Required in most prompts. In conversation, should gives advice. In a prompt, treat it as a rule.	Your essay should be 750–1,000 words.
may can are allowed to	Allowed. You choose.	You may write in first person (I, my).
are encouraged to to consider	A good idea, but your choice.	Consider sharing your draft with a tutor.
may not must not do not	Not allowed.	Do not use outside sources.

WATCH FOR THIS

In a prompt, **may not** means “not allowed.” It does not mean “maybe not.”

Words that set limits

- **at least two sources**: two or more.
- **no more than 1,000 words**: 1,000 words or fewer.
- **750–1,000 words**: any number from 750 to 1,000.
- **one specific change**: exactly one, described clearly.

Sentence starters: asking about a prompt

Instructors expect questions about prompts. Ask early, and say what you already understand. Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

I want to check my understanding. The essay should _____. Is that correct?

TO ASK ABOUT THE PURPOSE

What skill should I practice in this assignment?

TO ASK WHAT A WORD MEANS

In the prompt, what does “_____” mean?

TO ASK ABOUT A LIMIT

Does the word count include _____?

TO ASK ABOUT YOUR TOPIC

May I write about _____ for this assignment?

TO ASK WHAT IS ALLOWED

Are we allowed to use _____ for this assignment?

Practice

Read this prompt for a discussion post. Then answer the questions.

Read the assigned article about working from home. In one paragraph of 150–200 words, summarize the author’s main argument. Then, in a second paragraph, explain whether you agree with the author. Use one example from your own experience. You may write in first person (I, my). Do not use outside sources.

1. What are the two task verbs?
2. How many paragraphs must you write?
3. Is it acceptable to write “I agree because my job changed last year”?
4. You find a helpful website about working from home. Can you quote it in your post?
5. What does the prompt not tell you?

Suggested answers

1. Summarize and explain.

First you report the author's main argument in fewer words. Then you give your own position and your reasons.

2. Two.

The prompt says "one paragraph" and then "a second paragraph."

3. Yes.

"You may write in first person" means it is allowed. The prompt also asks for an example from your own experience.

4. No.

"Do not use outside sources" is a command. The only source you can use is the assigned article.

5. The length of the second paragraph, the due date, and how the post is graded.

These are good questions to ask. You could write: "Does the 150–200 word limit apply to the second paragraph too?"

Next step

Try this with a prompt from one of your classes

1. Highlight the task verb.
2. Underline every number and every word that sets a limit.
3. Circle any word you do not know. Look it up, or ask your instructor.
4. Write the task in one sentence: "In this assignment, I will _____ about _____ for _____."

Related pages

[Task verbs: analyze, compare, evaluate](#)

What each common task verb asks you to do.

[Reading a rubric](#)

How to use a rubric before, during, and after you write.

FOR INSTRUCTORS [Writing a clear assignment prompt](#)

The Instructor Companion page that pairs with this one.

UNDERSTAND THE ASSIGNMENT

Task Verbs: Analyze, Compare, Evaluate

Use this page when a prompt uses a verb such as analyze or evaluate, and you are not sure what it asks you to do.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/assignments/task-verbs.html>

Why the verb matters

A **task verb** is the word in a prompt that names the kind of thinking you must do. Two students can write about the same topic and get very different grades. One did what the verb asked, and the other did not.

Look at one topic with three different verbs:

- **Describe the effects of social media on sleep.** Report what the effects are.
- **Explain why social media affects sleep.** Give the causes.
- **Evaluate one way to reduce the effects of social media on sleep.** Judge how well it works, and give reasons.

These are three different assignments. A strong answer to the first one would be a weak answer to the third.

CHECK YOUR COURSE FIRST

Instructors do not all use these verbs in exactly the same way. If your prompt or your instructor defines a verb, use that definition. If you are not sure, ask.

KEY TERMS

Task verb: the verb that names the kind of thinking and writing you must do.

Evidence: facts, examples, or ideas from sources that support a point.

Criteria: the standards you use to judge something. One standard is a criterion.

Three groups of verbs

Most task verbs belong to one of three groups. Each group asks for more of your own thinking than the one before it.

Group 1: Report

Say what something is or what a source says. Stay close to the facts. The prompt is not asking for your opinion.

Verbs that ask you to report

Verb	What to do
define	Give the exact meaning of a word or idea.

Verb	What to do
describe	Say what something is like. Give details.
identify	Name the thing the prompt asks about. A short answer is often enough.
summarize	Give the main ideas of a text in fewer words, in your own words.

Group 2: Show how or why

Show how ideas connect. Your thinking is visible in the connections you make.

Verbs that ask you to show how or why

Verb	What to do
explain	Make something clear by giving reasons or steps. Answer “how?” or “why?”
analyze	Break something into parts. Show how the parts work together.
compare	Show how two things are alike. Many instructors also want the differences.
contrast	Show how two things are different.
apply	Use an idea from the course in a new situation.

Group 3: Take a position

Give your own judgment or view, and support it. Your opinion is required, and so are your reasons.

Verbs that ask you to take a position

Verb	What to do
argue	State a position. Support it with reasons and evidence.
evaluate	Judge how good, useful, or true something is. Name your criteria and give reasons.
respond	Give your own reaction to a text, with reasons.
reflect	Think about your own experience or learning. Say what it means to you and what you will do next.

A VERB TO ASK ABOUT

Discuss is the least exact task verb. It usually means: look at the topic from more than one side, and then give your view. If a prompt says only “discuss,” ask your instructor what the answer should include.

Example: one article, three verbs

Three students read the same article about sleep and college students. Each student had a different task verb. Here is the first part of each answer. Each number matches a note below.

Three answers with notes

Summarize

The author explains that ¹ college students who sleep fewer than seven hours have more trouble remembering information. The article describes a study in which students who slept longer earned higher grades.

Analyze

The article has three parts: a claim, a study, and advice. ² The advice depends on ³ the study. Without the study, the advice would be only the author's opinion.

Evaluate

The article is convincing but limited. ⁴ The evidence is strong because it comes from a study. ⁵ However, the study included students at only one university, so the results may not be true for all students.

¹ A summary reports.

The words **The author explains that** show that the ideas belong to the author. The student gives no opinion.

² An analysis names the parts.

The student divides the article into three parts.

³ An analysis connects the parts.

Depends on shows how one part is related to another. Naming the parts is not enough.

⁴ An evaluation gives a judgment.

Convincing and **limited** are judgment words. The student gives both a strength and a weakness.

⁵ An evaluation gives reasons.

The student's criterion is the quality of the evidence. **Because** and **so** connect each judgment to a reason.

Language focus: words for comparing and judging

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Signal words for each task

Words that show the kind of thinking

Task	Useful words	Example
Show a likeness	both, like, similarly, in the same way	Both courses require a final project.
Show a difference	however, while, unlike, in contrast	Online classes are flexible, while in-person classes have a fixed schedule.
Show a cause	because, so, as a result, leads to	Students sleep less, so they remember less.
Give a judgment	effective, convincing, limited, a strength, a weakness	One weakness of the plan is its cost.

Comparing with -er and more

To compare two things, change the adjective and add **than**.

- Short adjectives add -er: **cheaper than, easier than, longer than**.
- Longer adjectives use more: **more flexible than, more expensive than, more effective than**.
- Two common adjectives are irregular: **good, better** and **bad, worse**.

WATCH FOR THIS

Use -er or more, never both. Write **easier than**. Do not write “more easier than.” Also check the spelling of **than**. Then is a different word, about time.

Sentence starters

Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO SUMMARIZE

The author explains that _____.

The main idea of the article is _____.

TO ANALYZE

One important part of _____ is _____.

_____ depends on _____ because _____.

TO COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Both _____ and _____.

Unlike _____, _____.

TO EVALUATE

_____ is effective because _____.

One weakness of _____ is _____.

TO ARGUE

_____ should _____ because _____.

Practice

1. The prompt says: **“Summarize the article in 100 words.”** Should you say whether you agree with the author?
2. The prompt says: **“Compare online classes and in-person classes.”** A student writes three good paragraphs about online classes. What is missing?
3. Which sentence evaluates?
 - A. The article has five paragraphs.
 - B. The article is about sleep.
 - C. The article’s evidence is weak because it comes from one person’s experience.
4. Find the two task verbs: **“Describe one problem in your community and argue for a solution.”** What does each verb ask you to do?
5. Correct this sentence: **“Online classes are more easier then in-person classes.”**

Suggested answers

1. No.

Summarize is a Group 1 verb. Report the author’s main ideas. Your opinion is not part of the task.

2. The in-person classes, and the comparison.

Compare needs two things and the connections between them. Writing about one thing is describing, not comparing.

3. C.

It gives a judgment (weak) and a reason (because). A and B report facts.

4. Describe and argue.

First, say what the problem is like, with details. Then take a position on a solution and support it with reasons. The answer needs both parts.

5. Online classes are easier than in-person classes.

Easy is a short adjective, so it becomes easier, without more. The comparing word is than.

Next step

Try this with a prompt from one of your classes

1. Find every task verb. Some prompts have two or three.
2. Decide which group each verb belongs to.
3. For each verb, write one sentence that begins “I need to _____.”
4. If a verb is not on this page, or you are not sure what it means in your course, ask your instructor.

Related pages

[Understanding a writing prompt](#)

How to find the task, the requirements, and the limits in any prompt.

[Reading a rubric](#)

How to see what your instructor will look for in your answer.

[Quote, paraphrase, or summarize](#)

Three ways to bring a source into your writing.

FOR INSTRUCTORS [Writing a clear assignment prompt](#)

Includes defining the task verb as you use it in your course.

Reading a Rubric

Use this page when your instructor gives you a rubric, and you want to know how your work will be graded.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/assignments/rubric.html>

What a rubric is

A **rubric** is a chart that shows how your work will be graded. It tells you what your instructor will look for and how much each part counts. Many students look at the rubric only after they receive a grade. It helps more if you read it before you start.

Most rubrics have three parts:

- **Criteria.** These are the things your instructor grades, such as your argument or your evidence. They are usually the rows.
- **Levels.** These show how well you did, from the highest to the lowest. They are usually the columns.
- **Descriptions.** Each box describes what the work looks like at that level.

Many rubrics also show **points** or a percentage for each criterion. A criterion with more points matters more.

Use a rubric three times

- 1 **Before you write.** Read the highest level for each criterion. That is your goal.
- 2 **Before you submit.** Check your draft against each criterion, one at a time.
- 3 **After you get your grade.** Find the level you received. Compare it with the level above it to see what to change next time.

KEY TERMS

Rubric: a chart that shows how your work will be graded.

Criteria: the things that are graded. This word is plural. One of them is a criterion.

Level: a step on the scale, such as Strong or Developing.

Example: reading a rubric closely

This rubric is for an essay that argues for one change at a workplace, in a neighborhood, or at a college. Each number matches a note below the rubric.

A rubric with notes

Essay 2: A Change Worth Making (100 points)

Criteria 1	Strong 3	Developing	Beginning
Argument 30 points 2	States one specific change and gives clear reasons the reader would accept.	States a change, but the reasons are general or incomplete.	Describes a problem but does not argue for a change.
Evidence 30 points	Uses at least two credible sources and explains how each one supports the argument. 4	Uses two sources but does not explain how they support the argument.	Uses fewer than two sources, or the sources are not credible.
Organization 20 points	Each paragraph has one main idea, and the order is easy to follow.	Most paragraphs have one main idea, but the order is sometimes confusing.	The ideas are hard to follow.
Language 20 points 5	Sentences are clear. Errors are few and do not affect meaning.	Some errors make the reader slow down, but the meaning is clear.	Errors often make the meaning unclear.

1 The criteria.

This instructor grades four things: argument, evidence, organization, and language. Anything not on this list is not graded.

2 The points.

Argument and evidence are worth 60 of the 100 points. Give most of your time to those two.

3 The highest level.

Read this column first. It describes the essay your instructor hopes to receive, so you can use it as a checklist.

4 The difference between two levels.

Strong and **Developing** both use two sources. The difference is one phrase: the strong essay explains how each source supports the argument.

5 How language counts.

Language is worth 20 points. This rubric looks at meaning: an error matters most when it makes a sentence hard to understand. When you edit, fix those errors first.

Language focus: small words that separate the levels

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Words on a scale

Rubrics often describe every level with the same sentence and change only one or two words. Learn to see those words. Each row below goes from the most to the least.

Scale words, from most to least

What is measured	Level 4 (most)	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1 (least)
How many	all	most	some	few, none
How often	always, consistently	usually, often	sometimes	rarely, never
How completely	fully, thoroughly	mostly	partly	not

The word but

In a rubric, the words after **but** tell you what is missing. Read them as advice.

- **States a change, but the reasons are general.** To improve: make the reasons specific.

WATCH FOR THIS

Few and **a few** are different. **Errors are few** means there are almost none, which is good. **There are a few errors** means there are some.

Sentence starters: asking about a rubric

Fill in each blank with your own words.

BEFORE YOU WRITE

In the rubric, what does “_____” mean?

What is the difference between “_____” and “_____” for _____?

Could you show us an example of work at the highest level?

WHEN THERE IS NO RUBRIC

How will this assignment be graded?

What matters most in this assignment?

AFTER YOU GET YOUR GRADE

I received “_____” for _____. What would make it “_____”?

Practice

Use the example rubric on this page to answer the questions.

1. Which two criteria are worth the most points?
2. A student's essay has almost no grammar errors. It describes a problem at work in detail, but it never argues for a change. Which level will it receive for Argument?
3. A student quotes two credible sources but does not say how they support the argument. Which level is this for Evidence? What one change would raise it?
4. The rubric says **"Errors are few."** Does that mean many errors or not many?
5. You have one hour before the essay is due. Which is the better use of the hour: making your reasons clearer, or checking every comma?

Suggested answers

1. Argument and Evidence.

Each is worth 30 points. Together they are 60 of the 100 points.

2. Beginning.

That box says "Describes a problem but does not argue for a change." Good grammar earns points in the Language row. It cannot replace the argument.

3. Developing.

To reach Strong, the student needs to add a sentence after each source that explains how it supports the argument.

4. Not many.

Few without a means almost none.

5. Making your reasons clearer.

Argument is worth 30 points. In the Language row, an error matters most when it makes the meaning unclear, and a comma rarely does that.

Next step

Try this with a rubric from one of your classes

1. Find the criterion with the most points.
2. Highlight the description at the highest level for each criterion.
3. Turn each description into a question. For example: "Did I explain how each source supports my argument?"

4. Answer those questions before you submit your work.

Related pages

[Understanding a writing prompt](#)

The prompt for the essay this rubric grades.

[Task verbs: analyze, compare, evaluate](#)

What each common task verb asks you to do.

[Understanding instructor feedback](#)

How to turn comments on your work into a plan.

FOR INSTRUCTORS [Rubrics and where language accuracy fits](#)

The Instructor Companion page that pairs with this one.

Take part in class

TAKE PART IN CLASS

Writing a Discussion Post

Use this page when your class has an online discussion and you need to write your first post.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/participate/discussion-post.html>

What a discussion post is

Many college courses have an online **discussion board**. Your instructor asks a question. Each student writes an answer, called a **first post**, and the whole class can read it. Then students reply to each other.

This page is about the first post. A discussion is a conversation in writing. It is more careful than a text message and less formal than an essay.

Where a discussion post fits

What is compared	Text message	Discussion post	Essay
Who reads it	A friend	Your classmates and your instructor	Your instructor, in most classes
Sentences	Short pieces and abbreviations	Complete sentences	Complete sentences in organized paragraphs
Using "I"	Yes	Yes, in most classes	It depends on the assignment
Your opinion	Yes	Yes, with a reason	Yes, with reasons and evidence

What instructors expect

Instructors do not always write these expectations down. In most U.S. college classes, they apply to every student.

- **Answer every part of the question.** Many discussion questions have two parts, such as "which one, and why?"
- **Give your own opinion, and give a reason for it.** Repeating the reading is not enough.
- **Connect your answer to the course.** Use an idea from the reading or the lesson.
- **Remember who can read your post.** Your whole class can read it. Share only what you are comfortable sharing with classmates.
- **Post early when you can.** Classmates need time to read your post and reply.

KEY TERMS

Discussion board: the place in an online course where students post and reply.

First post: your own answer to the instructor's question. It is also called an initial post.

Reply: a response to a classmate's post.

Netiquette: polite and respectful behavior in online communication.

Four parts of a strong first post

1 Answer. Answer the question in your first sentence. Use some of the words from the question.

2 Reason. Say why. One clear reason is better than three weak ones.

3 Support. Add an idea from the reading, an example from your experience, or both.

4 Question. End with a question for your classmates.

WHY END WITH A QUESTION?

A question is an invitation. Classmates who are looking for a post to reply to will find yours easy to answer, and you will get more interesting replies. Do this unless your prompt asks for something different.

Example: a first post

The instructor asked this question: **"This week's reading describes three time-management strategies. Which strategy would be most useful for you, and why? Write 100–150 words."**

Here is one student's post. Each number matches a note below the post.

A first post with notes

The most useful strategy for me is breaking a large task into small steps. **1** I work full time, so I rarely have three free hours to study. **2** The reading explains that a small step is easier to start than a large task, **3** and I think this is true. For example, last week I had to read a long chapter for my biology class. **4** I divided the chapter into four sections and read one section each night after work. I finished one day early. I am less sure about the weekly schedule, because my work hours change every week. **5** Does anyone else have a schedule that changes? How do you plan your study time? **6**

1 **The answer.**

The first sentence answers “which strategy.” It repeats the words **most useful** and **strategy** from the question, so readers know immediately what the post is about.

2 **The reason.**

This sentence answers “why.” It is specific to the writer’s own life.

3 **Support from the reading.**

The writer names the source (**The reading explains that**) and gives the idea in different words.

4 **Support from experience.**

For example tells readers that a real case is coming. The details (four sections, one each night) make it believable.

5 **A second thought.**

This part is optional. It shows that the writer considered another strategy, and it prepares the question.

6 **The question.**

The question comes from the post, and a classmate can answer it from experience. It cannot be answered with only “yes” or “no.”

Language focus: asking a question

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Word order in questions

In most English questions, a helping verb such as do, does, did, has, or would comes before the subject.

How a question is built

Question word	Helping verb	Subject	Main verb and the rest
How	do	you	plan your study time?
What	would	you	do in this situation?
Why	does	this strategy	work for you?
(none)	Has	anyone else	had this experience?

WATCH FOR THIS

After do, does, or did, the main verb has no ending. Write **Why does this strategy work?** Do not write “Why does this strategy works?”

Closed and open questions

A **closed question** can be answered in one word. An **open question** needs an explanation. Open questions get better replies.

- Closed: **Do you agree?**
- Open: **What is one reason someone might disagree?**

Open questions often begin with how, why, or what.

Sentence starters

Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO ANSWER THE QUESTION

The most _____ for me is _____.

I think _____ because _____.

TO USE THE READING

The reading explains that _____.

According to the article, _____.

TO GIVE AN EXAMPLE

For example, _____.

In my experience, _____.

TO END WITH A QUESTION

Has anyone else had this experience with _____?

How would you handle _____?

What is one reason someone might disagree with _____?

Practice

1. A student posts: **"I think the weekly schedule is the best strategy. Do you agree?"** Which two of the four parts are missing?
2. Which closing question will get the most useful replies?
 - A. Do you agree?
 - B. Thoughts?
 - C. What do you do when two assignments are due on the same day?
3. Correct this question: **"Why this strategy works for you?"**

4. Correct this question: **“Anyone has tried this strategy?”**

Suggested answers

1. The reason and the support.

The post gives an answer and a question. It does not say why, and it has no example or idea from the reading.

2. C.

A classmate can answer it from experience, and the answer needs more than one word. A is a closed question. B is not a complete question, so readers do not know what you are asking.

3. Why does this strategy work for you?

The helping verb does comes before the subject. After does, the main verb has no ending: work.

4. Has anyone tried this strategy?

The helping verb has moves to the front of the question.

Next step

Check your post before you submit it

1. Did I answer every part of the question?
2. Did I give a reason?
3. Did I add an example or an idea from the reading?
4. Did I end with an open question?
5. Is my post the right length? Check the word count in the prompt.

Related pages

[Understanding a writing prompt](#)

How to find the task, the requirements, and the limits in any prompt, including a discussion question.

[Replying to classmates](#)

How to agree, add an idea, and disagree politely.

[Writing a journal or reflection](#)

How to write about your own learning.

FOR INSTRUCTORS

[Setting expectations for discussions and journals](#)

The Instructor Companion page that pairs with this one.

Replying to Classmates

Use this page when you need to reply to a classmate's post in an online discussion.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/participate/replying.html>

What a good reply does

A **reply** is your response to a classmate's post. A good reply adds something to the conversation. "I agree" or "Good post" is friendly, but it gives your classmate nothing to think about, and most instructors do not count it.

There are four useful kinds of reply. One reply can do more than one of them.

- 1 **Answer.** If your classmate asked a question, answer it. This is the easiest way to start.
- 2 **Agree and add.** Say what you agree with, then add something new: an example, a reason, or an idea from the reading.
- 3 **Disagree politely.** Give a different view, and give your reason.
- 4 **Ask.** Ask about something you want to understand better.

What instructors expect

Instructors do not always write these expectations down. In most U.S. college classes, they apply to every student.

- **Use your classmate's name.** It shows who you are talking to, and it is polite.
- **Show that you read the post.** Name the idea you are responding to.
- **You may disagree.** Disagreement is a normal part of a college discussion. It is welcome when you give a reason.
- **Write about the idea, not the person.**
- **Check the prompt.** It tells you how many replies to write and how long each one should be.

A KIND CHOICE

If you can choose, reply to a post that has no replies yet. Every student hopes that someone will answer.

KEY TERMS

Reply: a response to a classmate's post.

Thread: one post and all the replies to it.

Tone: the feeling your words give the reader, such as friendly, angry, or respectful.

Example: a reply

A classmate named Daniela wrote that breaking a large task into small steps works for her, but a weekly schedule does not, because her work hours change. She ended her post with a question: **“Does anyone else have a schedule that changes? How do you plan your study time?”**

Here is one reply. Each number matches a note below it.

A reply with notes

Daniela, ¹ my schedule changes every week too, so I understand the problem. ² I like your idea of reading one section each night. What works for me is planning on Sunday night, after my manager posts the schedule. I look for three short blocks of 30 minutes and put them in my phone calendar. ³ I see the weekly schedule a little differently, though. I think it can still work if you make a new one each week. ⁴ Have you tried studying during your breaks at work? ⁵

1 The name.

The reply begins with the classmate's name.

2 The connection.

This sentence shows that the writer read the post and understood it.

3 The answer.

Daniela asked how other students plan their study time. The writer answers with exact details: when, how many, how long.

4 A polite disagreement.

The writer has a different view of the weekly schedule. The words **a little differently** and **I think** make the tone friendly. The second sentence gives the reason.

5 A question back.

The question keeps the conversation going. This part is optional.

Language focus: disagreeing politely

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Softening words

In English, a very direct disagreement can sound rude, even when the writer does not mean it that way. Writers add small **softening words** to keep a friendly tone.

The same opinion, with a different tone

Too direct	Polite and clear
You are wrong.	I see this differently.
That is not true.	I am not sure that is always true.
This strategy does not work.	This strategy might not work for everyone.
Your post is confusing.	I did not understand your second point. Could you explain it?

Common softening words: **I think, in my experience, might, may, could, sometimes, not always, a little.**

A pattern you can use

Say what you agree with or understand. Then give your different view and your reason.

- **I agree that small steps help, but I think a schedule is also important because it protects your study time.**
- **I understand your point about cost. In my experience, though, the free tools work well.**

WATCH FOR THIS

Softening changes your tone. It does not change your opinion. A reply with too many softening words can hide what you think, so state your view and give your reason.

Sentence starters

Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO ANSWER A CLASSMATE'S QUESTION

You asked about _____. What works for me is _____.

TO AGREE AND ADD

I agree that _____, and I would add _____.

I had a similar experience when _____.

TO DISAGREE POLITELY

I see this differently because _____.

I understand your point about _____, but _____.

TO ASK

Could you say more about _____?

What did you mean by _____?

Practice

1. The prompt says a reply “must add something.” Which reply does?
 - A. Great post! I agree with everything you said.
 - B. I agree that small steps help. I use the same idea for math homework: I do five problems, and then I take a break.
 - C. Nice job.
2. A classmate’s post ends with this question: **“How do you stay focused when you study at home?”** What is the easiest way to begin your reply?
3. Make this sentence polite and clear: **“You are wrong about the weekly schedule.”**
4. Which sentence is about the idea, not the person?
 - A. You did not read the article carefully.
 - B. I think the article says something different in the second paragraph.

Suggested answers

1. B.

It says what the writer agrees with and adds a new example. A and C are friendly, but they add nothing.

2. Answer the question.

For example: “You asked how to stay focused at home. What works for me is putting my phone in another room.”

3. One possible answer: “I see the weekly schedule differently. I think it helps because it shows me when I am free.”

The new sentence talks about the schedule, not the classmate, and it gives a reason. Other answers are possible.

4. B.

Sentence A judges the classmate. Sentence B talks about the article and gives the classmate something to check.

Next step

Check your reply before you submit it

1. Did I use my classmate's name?
2. Did I show which idea I am responding to?
3. Did I add something: an answer, an example, a reason, or a different view?
4. If I disagreed, did I give a reason and write about the idea?
5. Is my reply the right length? Check the prompt.

Related pages

[Writing a discussion post](#)

How to write the first post, including a closing question.

[Interacting in class: common expectations](#)

What instructors and classmates usually expect in a U.S. college class.

FOR INSTRUCTORS

[Setting expectations for discussions and journals](#)

The Instructor Companion page that pairs with this one.

Writing a Journal or Reflection

Use this page when your instructor asks you to write a journal entry or reflect on your learning.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/participate/journal.html>

What a journal or reflection is

A **journal** or **reflection** is writing about your own learning. Your instructor asks you to think about something you did, read, or experienced. Then you explain what it means to you and what you will do next.

A reflection is not a summary. A summary repeats what the reading or the lesson said. A reflection explains what you noticed, learned, or now think about it.

Summary and reflection

What is compared	Summary	Reflection
The main question	What did the text say?	What did I learn, and what will I do with it?
Using “I”	Usually no	Yes. “I” is expected.
Your experience	Not included	The center of the writing
Example sentence	The chapter describes three study methods.	I tried the second method this week, and it changed how I study.

What instructors expect

Instructors do not always write these expectations down. In most U.S. college classes, they apply to every student.

- **Be specific.** Write about one moment, one task, or one idea. “I learned a lot” does not tell the reader what you learned.
- **Be honest.** You may write that something was difficult or that you were confused. Instructors want to know this. An honest reflection is a good reflection.
- **Connect to the course.** Use a word, an idea, or a skill from the class.
- **Look forward.** End with what you will do next time.
- **Write in complete sentences.** The style is less formal than an essay, but it is not a text message.

YOU CHOOSE WHAT TO SHARE

A reflection is about your learning. It does not need private details about your life, your family, or your health. A prompt may ask about personal experience. If you prefer not to answer, look in the prompt for another option, or ask your instructor for one. This is a normal request.

KEY TERMS

Journal: a set of short writings about your learning, often written each week.

Reflection: writing that looks back at an experience and explains what you learned from it.

Low-stakes writing: writing that counts for few or no points. It is a place to practice and think.

Prompt: the question or instructions for the assignment.

Before you write, check the prompt for two things: **who will read it** (only your instructor, or your classmates too) and **whether grammar is graded**. If the prompt does not say, you may ask.

Three questions that build a reflection

Most reflections answer three questions, in this order.

1 What happened? Describe one specific experience: a task, a reading, a test, or a class activity. Keep this part short.

2 What did I learn from it? Explain what you noticed, understood, or now think. This is the most important part. Give it the most space.

3 What will I do next? Name one specific action for the future.

WATCH THE BALANCE

A common problem is a long first part and a short second part. If most of your sentences describe what happened, cut some, and add more about what you learned.

Example: a reflection

The instructor gave this prompt: “**Look back at your first essay draft. What did you learn about your writing process? What will you do differently next time? Write about 150 words.**”

Here is one student’s reflection. Each number matches a note below it.

A reflection with notes

For my first draft, I started writing the night before it was due. **1** I did not make an outline, and I changed my main idea two times while I was writing. I felt frustrated, and the draft did not say what I wanted to say. **2** Now I understand why the instructor talks about writing as a process. **3** I think my real problem was not time. It was that I did not know my main idea before I started. **4** The tutor asked me to explain my essay in one sentence, and I

could not do it. **Next time, I will write my main idea in one sentence first, and I will make a short outline two days before the due date.** 5

1 What happened.

The writer names one specific experience. The verbs are in the past tense, because this part is finished.

2 An honest feeling.

The writer says the experience was difficult. This is welcome in a reflection.

3 A connection to the course.

The writer uses an idea from class: writing as a process. The verb changes to the present tense, because the writer is describing what they understand now.

4 What the writer learned.

This is the center of the reflection. The writer moves past the first explanation (time) to a deeper one (no main idea). The words **I think** show that this is the writer's own conclusion.

5 What the writer will do next.

The plan is specific: two actions and a time. **Next time, I will** moves the writing to the future.

Language focus: moving between past, present, and future

LANGUAGE FOCUS

One reflection, three times

A reflection usually moves through three times: what happened (past), what you think now (present), and what you will do (future). Each part has its own verb tense. A **time word** at the start of a sentence tells the reader that the time is changing.

Verb tense in each part of a reflection

Part and tense	Time words	Example
What happened: past	last week, at first, when I started	At first, I read the chapter only once.
What I learned: present	now, today, at this point	Now I understand why notes help me.
What I will do: future	next time, in the next unit, from now on	Next time, I will take notes while I read.

WATCH FOR THIS

Inside one part, keep the same tense. Change tense when the time changes, and use a time word to show the change. Write **Last week I studied alone. Now I study with a partner.** Do not write "Last week I study alone."

One more pattern is common in reflections: **I learned that** + a complete sentence. For example: **I learned that I write better in the morning.**

Sentence starters

Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO SAY WHAT HAPPENED

When I _____, I _____.

At first, I _____.

TO BE HONEST ABOUT DIFFICULTY

The most difficult part was _____ because _____.

I was confused about _____.

TO SAY WHAT YOU LEARNED

I learned that _____.

Now I understand _____.

This changed how I think about _____.

TO CONNECT TO THE COURSE

This connects to _____ from our class.

The reading helped me see that _____.

TO PLAN THE NEXT STEP

Next time, I will _____.

In the next unit, I plan to _____.

Practice

1. Which sentence is reflection, not summary?
 - A. The article explains how sleep affects memory.
 - B. After I read the article, I started going to bed one hour earlier before tests.
 - C. The author is a professor at a large university.
2. Make this sentence more specific: **"I learned a lot from this project."**
3. Correct the verb tense: **"Last week I study for the quiz, but I do not finish the review."**
4. A student's reflection is eight sentences long. Six sentences describe what happened. One sentence says what the student learned. One sentence gives a plan. What should the student change?
5. A journal prompt asks you to write about a difficult time in your family. You prefer not to. What can you do?

Suggested answers

1. B.

It describes what the writer did because of the reading. A summarizes the article. C gives a fact about the author.

2. One possible answer: "I learned that I need to check my sources before I start writing, not after."

The new sentence names one thing the writer learned. Use I learned that + a complete sentence. Other answers are possible.

3. Last week I studied for the quiz, but I did not finish the review.

Last week shows the past, so both verbs are past tense: studied and did not finish.

4. Shorten the first part, and add more about what they learned.

"What I learned" is the most important part, so it should have the most space. Two sentences about what happened are usually enough.

5. Look for another option in the prompt, or ask your instructor for one.

You never have to share private matters in a reflection. Asking for a different topic is normal and polite. For example: "Could I write about a difficult time at work or at school instead?"

Next step

Check your reflection before you submit it

1. Did I write about one specific experience?
2. Did I explain what I learned, and give that part the most space?
3. Did I connect to an idea or skill from the course?
4. Did I end with a specific plan?
5. Did I change verb tense only when the time changed?
6. Did I share only what I am comfortable sharing?

Related pages

[Understanding a writing prompt](#)

How to find the task, the reader, and the requirements in any prompt.

[Writing a discussion post](#)

How to write for classmates in an online discussion.

Verb tense: staying consistent

More practice with past, present, and future.

FOR INSTRUCTORS

Setting expectations for discussions and journals

The Instructor Companion page that pairs with this one.

Interacting in Class: Common Expectations

Use this page when you want to know what instructors and classmates usually expect in a U.S. college class.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/participate/interacting.html>

Common expectations in a U.S. college class

Every class has rules that the syllabus explains. Most classes also have **unwritten expectations**: things instructors and classmates expect but rarely say out loud. This page describes the most common ones in U.S. college classes, in person and online.

Instructors are different. Your syllabus and your instructor always come first. If something on this page does not match your class, follow your class.

Talking with your instructor

- **Use the name your instructor asks for.** Look in the syllabus or listen on the first day. If you are not sure, use **Professor** + last name. It is correct for any college instructor.
- **Questions are welcome.** Asking a question shows that you are paying attention. It does not mean that you are behind or that the instructor taught badly.
- **You may disagree with your instructor.** Disagreement with a reason, in a polite tone, is a normal part of college learning.
- **Office hours are for every student.** Instructors set times to meet with students. You do not need a problem to go. One question is enough.

Taking part in class

- **Speaking in class is often part of the grade.** Check the syllabus for the word **participation**.
- **Wait for a pause, or raise your hand.** In a large class, raise your hand. In a small group, wait until the speaker finishes.
- **A short answer is fine.** Your answer does not need to be perfect or long. Instructors value an attempt.
- **“I am not sure yet” is an acceptable answer.** You can also ask for a moment to think.
- **Asking someone to repeat is normal.** Students and instructors do it very often.

Working in groups

- **Everyone is expected to contribute.** Offer to do one task, even a small one.
- **Agree on who does what, and by when.** Write it down where the whole group can see it.
- **If you cannot finish your part, tell the group early.**

Online classes

- **Check the course site several times a week.** Announcements and messages often have important changes.
- **In a live video class, follow the instructor's rules** for cameras, microphones, and the chat.
- **A written message is part of the class too.** Use a greeting, complete sentences, and your name.

KEY TERMS

Participation: taking an active part in class, such as speaking, asking questions, or working with a group.

Office hours: times when an instructor is available to meet with students. Some instructors call them student hours.

Syllabus: the document that explains the rules, schedule, and grading for a course.

Clarify: to make something clear. A clarifying question asks for a clearer explanation.

Example: asking for help in class

An instructor is explaining a new assignment. A student does not hear one part and is not sure about another part. Here is what the student says. Each number matches a note below.

A short conversation with notes

Instructor: The project is due at the end of the unit. You will work in pairs, and each pair will present for about five minutes.

Student: Excuse me, Professor Hale. ❶ Could you repeat the last part, please? ❷

Instructor: Sure. Each pair will present for about five minutes.

Student: Thank you. So, do you mean that both partners need to speak? ❸

Instructor: Yes. Both partners should speak for part of the time.

Student: OK, I understand. Thank you. ❹

❶ Getting attention politely.

Excuse me and the instructor's name show respect. In a large class, raise your hand first.

❷ A polite request.

Could you and please make the request polite. The student says exactly which part to repeat.

❸ Checking understanding.

The student says the idea again in their own words and asks if it is correct. This is a clarifying question.

❹ Closing the exchange.

The student shows that the question is answered. The instructor knows the conversation is finished.

IF YOU PREFER NOT TO ASK IN FRONT OF THE CLASS

You can ask the instructor after class, in office hours, or in a message. All three are normal. Ask soon, so you have time to use the answer.

Language focus: making polite requests

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Could, would, and may

In English, a request that begins with a command, such as “Repeat that,” can sound rude. A question with could, would, or may sounds polite.

The same request, with a different tone

Too direct	Polite	Pattern
Repeat that.	Could you repeat that, please?	Could you + base verb
Explain the second step.	Would you explain the second step again?	Would you + base verb
Speak more slowly.	Would you mind speaking more slowly?	Would you mind + verb-ing
I want to ask something.	May I ask a question?	May I + base verb

WATCH FOR THIS

After could you, would you, and may I, use the base verb, with no to and no ending. Write **Could you explain it?** Do not write “Could you to explain it?”

After would you mind, use the -ing form. Write **Would you mind explaining it?** Do not write “Would you mind to explain it?”

Can you and can I are also common in speech, and they are polite with please. Could and may sound a little more formal. They are a safe choice with instructors.

Sentence starters

Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO ASK SOMEONE TO REPEAT

Could you repeat the part about _____, please?

Sorry, I did not hear _____.

TO CHECK THAT YOU UNDERSTAND

So, do you mean that _____?

Just to check, we need to _____?

TO JOIN A DISCUSSION

I would like to add _____.

That connects to _____.

TO DISAGREE WITH RESPECT

I have a question about _____. I read that _____.

I see it a little differently because _____.

TO ASK FOR TIME

I am not sure yet. May I think about it for a moment?

Could I come back to that question?

TO OFFER HELP IN A GROUP

I can do _____.

Would it help if I _____?

Practice

1. The syllabus lists your instructor as **Dr. Lena Ortiz**. She does not say what to call her. What do you call her?
2. Make this request polite: **"Say the due date again."**
3. Correct this request: **"Would you mind to show the example again?"**
4. True or false: If you ask a question in class, the instructor will think you were not paying attention.
5. Your group has divided the work. Two days before the due date, you see that you cannot finish your part. What should you do?

Suggested answers

1. Dr. Ortiz or Professor Ortiz.

Use a title + her last name. Dr. is the title she uses in the syllabus. Professor is correct for any college instructor.

Use her first name only if she asks you to.

2. Could you say the due date again, please?

Could you + base verb turns the command into a polite question. Would you also works.

3. Would you mind showing the example again?

After would you mind, use the -ing form, not to + verb.

4. False.

In U.S. college classes, questions show that you are listening and thinking. Instructors expect them.

5. Tell the group now, and suggest a plan.

An early message gives the group time to adjust. For example: "I cannot finish the slides by Thursday. I can finish two of them. Could someone help with the last one?"

Next step

Try one thing this week

1. Find out what your instructor wants to be called. Check the syllabus.
2. Find your instructor's office hours in the syllabus or on the course site.
3. Ask one question in class, after class, or in office hours.
4. Use one polite request from this page.

Related pages

[Writing a discussion post](#)

How to take part in an online discussion.

[Replying to classmates](#)

How to agree, add an idea, and disagree politely in writing.

[Working with a tutor](#)

What a tutor does and what to say in a session.

[Emailing an instructor and asking questions](#)

How to ask for help in writing.

Read college texts

READ COLLEGE TEXTS

Using Context Clues

Use this page when you meet a new word in a reading and want to understand it without stopping to look it up.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/reading/context-clues.html>

What context clues are

College readings have many new words. You do not need to look up every one. Often, the words around a new word, called the **context**, give you enough information to understand it. These hints are called **context clues**.

Using context clues saves time, and it keeps you reading. Stopping for every word makes it hard to follow the main idea.

When to stop and look a word up

- The word appears many times.
- The word is in the title, a heading, or the assignment directions.
- You cannot understand the sentence without it, even after you use the clues.

Otherwise, make a guess, mark the word, and keep reading. You can check your guess later.

KEY TERMS

Context: the words and sentences around a word.

Clue: a piece of information that helps you find an answer.

Prefix: a word part at the beginning of a word, such as re- in rewrite.

Suffix: a word part at the end of a word, such as -tion in information.

Four kinds of clues

Context clues and their signal words

Kind of clue	Signal words	Example
Definition: the writer explains the word	is, means, is called, refers to, commas, parentheses	A stipend , or a small fixed payment, helps students pay for books.
Example: the writer gives examples	such as, for example, including	Many perishable foods, such as milk, fish, and fresh fruit, must stay cold.

Kind of clue	Signal words	Example
Contrast: the writer gives an opposite	but, however, unlike, instead of	Unlike her reticent brother, Maria talks to everyone.
Word parts: the word itself	a prefix, a root, or a suffix you know	The plan was unworkable . (un- = not, -able = can be: it could not work.)

Example: clues in a reading

This paragraph comes from a business textbook. A student did not know the four highlighted words. Each number matches a note below.

A textbook paragraph with notes

Small businesses often face high **turnover**, ¹ which means that many employees leave and must be replaced. To keep workers, some owners offer **incentives**, ² such as bonuses, flexible schedules, and paid training. However, these benefits are not always **feasible**; ³ a new business may not have enough money to pay for them. Owners who **reconsider** ⁴ their budget each year can often find money for one or two.

1 A definition clue.

Which means that introduces the meaning: workers leaving and being replaced.

2 An example clue.

Such as introduces examples: bonuses, flexible schedules, training. All are rewards that make people want to stay. That is what **incentives** are.

3 A clue in the next part.

The words after the semicolon explain why the benefits are not always **feasible**: there is not enough money. So **feasible** means possible to do.

4 A word-part clue.

Re- means again. **Reconsider** means to think about again.

Language focus: word parts

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Prefixes and suffixes in college words

Many academic words are built from parts. If you know a part, you can often guess a new word. A **prefix** often changes the meaning. A **suffix** often changes the kind of word: a noun, a verb, or an adjective.

Common word parts

Part	Meaning	Examples
un-, in-, im-, dis-	not	unclear, incomplete, impossible, disagree
re-	again	revise, rewrite, reconsider
pre-	before	prerequisite, preview
-tion, -ment, -ness	makes a noun	information, assignment, awareness
-ize, -ify	makes a verb	summarize, clarify
-able, -ive, -al	makes an adjective	reliable, effective, personal

Word families

One root can make several words. Knowing the family helps you read and write: **analyze** (verb), **analysis** (noun), **analytical** (adjective).

WATCH FOR THIS

Word parts give you a guess, not a promise. In- means “not” in incomplete, but it means “in” in include. Check the guess against the sentence.

Notes you can write

When you guess a word, write a short note in the margin or in your notebook. Fill in each blank with your own words.

YOUR GUESS

I think _____ means _____.

YOUR REASON

The clue is _____.

The word part _____ means _____.

TO CHECK LATER

Look up _____. It appears _____ times.

Practice

Guess the meaning of each bold word. Name the kind of clue.

1. The nurse checked the patient's **vital signs**, including heart rate, breathing, and temperature.
2. The first draft was **verbose**, but the final draft was short and clear.
3. The company plans to **relocate** its office to a larger building.
4. **Erosion**, the slow loss of soil to wind and water, is a problem on many farms.

Suggested answers

1. Basic body measurements that show health.

An example clue: including introduces heart rate, breathing, and temperature.

2. Using too many words.

A contrast clue: but introduces the opposite, short and clear.

3. To move to a new place.

A word-part clue: re- (again) + locate (place). The sentence also says where: a larger building.

4. The slow loss of soil.

A definition clue: the commas surround the meaning.

Next step

Try this with your next reading

1. Read one page without stopping to look up words.
2. Mark each new word, and write your guess next to it.
3. After the page, look up only the words that appear often or that you still need.
4. Check your guesses. How many were close?

Related pages

[Unpacking a long sentence](#)

How to find the main idea in a difficult sentence.

[College terms you will hear in your first weeks](#)

Plain meanings for common college words.

[Translation, grammar tools, and AI: check the rules first](#)

Whether you may use a dictionary or a translation tool on an assignment.

Unpacking a Long Sentence

Use this page when you read a sentence two or three times and still cannot find the main idea.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/reading/long-sentence.html>

Why college sentences are long

Textbooks and articles often use long sentences. A writer adds details, reasons, and examples to one main idea, and the sentence grows. The main idea is still there, but it is hidden among the extra parts.

You can unpack a long sentence the way you unpack a bag: take the extra things out, find the main thing, and then put the rest back one piece at a time.

KEY TERMS

Core: the main subject and the main verb of a sentence, and the words they need to make sense.

Extra part: words that add information but are not the core, such as a phrase between commas.

Main verb: the verb that goes with the main subject.

Five steps to unpack a sentence

- 1 **Put brackets around the extra parts.** Look for words between commas, parts that start with which, who, or that, and opening phrases such as In 2020 or According to the report.
- 2 **Find the main verb** in what is left.
- 3 **Find its subject.** Ask: who or what does this?
- 4 **Read the core alone.** It is often a short, simple sentence.
- 5 **Add the extra parts back**, one at a time. Ask what each one adds: when, why, which one, or an example.

Then say the whole sentence in your own words, in two or three short sentences.

Example: unpacking one sentence

This sentence comes from a health textbook. Each number matches a note below.

A long sentence with notes

According to the study, **1** adults **2** who sleep fewer than six hours a night, **3** a group that includes many shift workers, **4** have **5** a higher risk of heart disease because their bodies do not have enough time to recover. **6**

1 An opening phrase.

It tells you the source. Bracket it.

2 The subject.

Who has the risk? **Adults.**

3 A who part.

It tells you which adults. Bracket it.

4 A part between commas.

It gives an example of the group. Bracket it.

5 The main verb.

It matches the plural subject **adults**, not **a group**.

6 A because part.

It gives the reason. Bracket it.

The core, and the sentence in short pieces

- Core: **Adults have a higher risk of heart disease.**
- In your own words: **A study looked at adults who sleep less than six hours. Many of them are shift workers. They have a higher risk of heart disease, because their bodies cannot recover.**

Language focus: who, which, and that

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Parts that describe a noun

A part that begins with who, which, or that usually describes the noun just before it. It has its own verb, but that verb is not the main verb.

Describing parts

Word	Describes	Example (the describing part is in bold)
who	people	Students who work full time need flexible classes.
which	things	The report, which was published last year , uses new data.

Word	Describes	Example (the describing part is in bold)
that	things or people	The study that the author describes was small.

WATCH FOR THIS

Do not stop at the first verb you see. In **Students who work full time need flexible classes**, the first verb is work, but it belongs to the who part. The main verb is need.

Notes you can write

Use these to take notes on a difficult sentence. Fill in each blank with your own words.

THE CORE

The main idea is that _____.

THE EXTRA PARTS

The sentence also tells me when: _____.

It tells me why: _____.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS

In other words, _____.

Practice

Find the core (the main subject and the main verb) of each sentence.

1. In many rural counties, clinics that once served whole towns have closed.
2. The author, who worked as a nurse for twenty years, argues that hospitals need more staff.
3. Workers who receive training, according to the survey, stay longer at their jobs.

Then say this sentence in two or three short sentences: **“Because the cost of textbooks has risen quickly, many colleges, including community colleges, now offer free online books that students can use on any device.”**

Suggested answers

1. Clinics have closed.

In many rural counties is an opening phrase. That once served whole towns describes the clinics.

2. The author argues (that hospitals need more staff).

The part between commas describes the author. Worked is not the main verb.

3. **Workers stay** (longer at their jobs).

Who receive training describes the workers, and according to the survey gives the source.

One possible answer: Textbooks cost much more than before. Because of this, many colleges now offer free online books. Students can read them on any device.

The core is colleges offer free online books. Other answers are possible.

Next step

Try this with your next reading

1. Find one sentence that you had to read twice.
2. Copy it, and put brackets around the extra parts.
3. Write the core as a short sentence.
4. Write the whole idea in your own words.

Related pages

[Using context clues](#)

How to guess the meaning of a new word from the words around it.

[Subject-verb agreement](#)

More about finding the real subject of a sentence.

[Sentence boundaries: fragments and run-ons](#)

What makes a complete sentence.

Write

WRITE

Building a Paragraph

Use this page when you are writing or revising a paragraph and want it to develop one clear idea.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/writing/building-a-paragraph.html>

What a college paragraph does

In college writing, a **paragraph** develops **one main idea**. It tells the reader the idea, supports it, and explains why the support matters. When a new idea starts, a new paragraph starts.

Readers in U.S. colleges expect the main idea near the beginning of the paragraph. They read the first sentence to learn what the paragraph is about, and they expect the rest to stay on that idea.

KEY TERMS

Topic sentence: the sentence that states the main idea of a paragraph. It is usually the first sentence.

Support: reasons, examples, facts, or ideas from a source that show the main idea is true.

Transition: a word or phrase that connects one idea to the next, such as for example or as a result.

Four parts of a strong paragraph

- 1 **Point.** The topic sentence. State the main idea in one sentence.
- 2 **Support.** Give a reason, an example, a fact, or an idea from a source.
- 3 **Explain.** Say how the support proves your point. This is the part writers most often skip.
- 4 **Link.** End by connecting back to the main idea, or forward to the next paragraph.

A paragraph can repeat steps 2 and 3. A strong paragraph often has two pieces of support, each with its own explanation.

HOW LONG?

Most college paragraphs are four to eight sentences. A one-sentence paragraph usually needs more support. A paragraph that fills a whole page usually has more than one idea.

Example: a paragraph from an essay

This paragraph comes from an essay that argues that colleges should offer more evening classes. Each number matches a note below.

A paragraph with notes

Evening classes make college possible for students who work during the day. **1** According to a campus survey, more than half of our students have a job. **2** This means that many of them cannot attend a class at 10 a.m. without losing pay. **3** For example, my coworker wanted to study welding, but every section met in the morning. **4** She waited a year until an evening section opened, and she lost a year of progress. **5** More evening sections would help working students start and finish their programs on time. **6**

1 Point.

The topic sentence states one main idea. Every other sentence supports it.

2 Support from a source.

According to names where the fact comes from.

3 Explain.

The writer says what the fact means for the argument. Without this sentence, the reader has to make the connection.

4 Support from experience.

For example introduces a real case.

5 Explain.

The writer shows the cost of the problem.

6 Link.

The last sentence returns to the main idea and shows why it matters.

Language focus: transitions

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Words that connect ideas

A **transition** tells the reader how the next sentence connects to the one before it. Choose the transition that matches the connection.

Transitions by purpose

To show	Transitions	Example
an example	for example, for instance	For example, my coworker wanted to study welding.
more of the same	also, in addition, another	In addition, evening classes help parents.
a result	as a result, so, therefore	As a result, she lost a year of progress.
a contrast	however, but, on the other hand	However, evening classes cost more to staff.
what it means	this means that, in other words	This means that many students cannot attend.

WATCH FOR THIS

Use a transition when it helps, not in every sentence. A paragraph where every sentence starts with a transition is hard to read. A comma usually follows a transition at the start of a sentence: **As a result, she waited.**

Sentence starters

Fill in each blank with your own words.

POINT

_____ is important because _____.

One reason _____ is _____.

SUPPORT

According to _____, _____.

For example, _____.

EXPLAIN

This means that _____.

This shows that _____.

LINK

For these reasons, _____.

This is why _____.

Practice

Read this paragraph. Then answer the questions.

(1) Online tutoring helps students who cannot come to campus. (2) Some students live an hour away. (3) The library has new computers. (4) A video session lets these students get help from home. (5) This saves them two hours of driving.

1. Which sentence is the topic sentence?
2. Which sentence does not belong? Why?
3. Which sentence explains why the support matters?
4. Write a last sentence that links back to the main idea.

Suggested answers

1. Sentence 1.

It states the main idea, and the other sentences support it.

2. Sentence 3.

New computers in the library are not about students who cannot come to campus.

3. Sentence 5.

It shows what the support means: time saved.

4. One possible answer: "For these students, online tutoring makes help possible."

It returns to the main idea. Other answers are possible.

Next step

Check one paragraph in your draft

1. Underline the topic sentence. Does it state one main idea?
2. Does every sentence support that idea?
3. After each piece of support, did you explain what it shows?
4. Does the last sentence link back or forward?

Related pages

[Sentences that say what you mean](#)

How to make each sentence clear and specific.

[Quote, paraphrase, or summarize](#)

How to use a source as support.

Sentence boundaries: fragments and run-ons

How to punctuate the sentences inside your paragraph.

Sentences That Say What You Mean

Use this page when you are revising, and a sentence feels unclear, vague, or too long.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/writing/clear-sentences.html>

What a clear sentence does

A clear sentence lets the reader understand it the first time. In college writing, clear is better than complicated. Instructors do not give more points for long words or long sentences. They give points for ideas the reader can follow.

This page gives five ways to make a sentence clearer. Use them when you revise, not while you write your first draft.

KEY TERMS

Specific: exact. Three weeks is more specific than a while.

Vague: not exact or not clear. Things and stuff are vague words.

Wordy: using more words than the idea needs.

Pronoun: a short word that stands for a noun, such as it, this, or they.

Five ways to make a sentence clearer

Five ways to revise a sentence

Way	Unclear	Clearer
1. Use specific words	The class had a lot of good things.	The class had short videos and weekly quizzes.
2. Say who does the action	Mistakes were made in the report.	Our team made two mistakes in the report.
3. Cut extra words	Due to the fact that I was sick, I was not able to attend.	Because I was sick, I could not attend.
4. Put one main idea in each sentence	I like nursing and my clinical is on Fridays and the hospital is far.	I like nursing. My clinical is on Fridays, at a hospital far from home.
5. Make this and it clear	Tuition went up, and the bus schedule changed. This made it hard to attend.	Tuition went up, and the bus schedule changed. These changes made it hard to attend.

Common wordy phrases

Wordy phrases and shorter choices

Instead of	Write
due to the fact that	because
in order to	to
at this point in time	now
in my personal opinion, I think	I think
is able to	can

Example: one sentence, revised

A student revised one sentence from a draft. Each number matches a note below.

A first draft and a revision, with notes

First draft: In my personal opinion, I think that the thing that is the biggest problem for students is that there are not enough parking spaces and it causes them to be late.

Revision: The biggest problem for students **1** is parking. **2** The main lot fills by 8:30 a.m., **3** so students who arrive later often miss the start of class. **4**

1 Extra words cut.

In my personal opinion, I think that the thing that is became nothing. The reader knows it is the writer's opinion.

2 The main idea, early.

The reader learns the point in a short first sentence.

3 A specific detail.

By 8:30 a.m. is more convincing than not enough spaces.

4 It replaced.

The first draft said it causes them. Now the sentence names who is affected and how.

Language focus: this + a noun

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Point back clearly

Writers often begin a sentence with This or It to point back to the sentence before. When the sentence before has more than one idea, the reader cannot tell which one you mean. Add a noun after this to name it.

This alone and this + a noun

Unclear

This shows that students need support.

This is a serious problem.

It made the results less reliable.

Clear

This survey shows that students need support.

This delay is a serious problem.

The small sample made the results less reliable.

WATCH FOR THIS

Use this with a singular noun and these with a plural noun: **this change, these changes.**

Sentence starters

Use these to begin clear sentences. Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO STATE A MAIN IDEA

The main problem is _____.

The most important reason is _____.

TO POINT BACK

This _____ shows that _____.

These _____ mean that _____.

TO BE SPECIFIC

For example, _____.

In _____, _____ happened.

Practice

Make each sentence clearer. Use the way named in brackets.

1. The reading had a lot of interesting stuff. [specific words]
2. The essay was not finished on time. [say who]
3. In order to pass the class, it is important to attend. [cut extra words]

4. The clinic closed and the bus stopped. This hurt the town. [this + a noun]

Suggested answers

1. **One possible answer: The reading had three surprising facts about sleep.**

Replace a lot of interesting stuff with exactly what the reading had.

2. **One possible answer: I did not finish the essay on time.**

The new sentence names the person.

3. **One possible answer: To pass the class, attend every week.**

In order to becomes to, and it is important to becomes a direct statement.

4. **One possible answer: These two losses hurt the town.**

There are two ideas before this, so these + a plural noun names both.

Next step

Revise three sentences in your draft

1. Find a sentence with thing, stuff, or a lot. Make it specific.
2. Find a sentence that begins with This or It. Is it clear what it points to?
3. Find your longest sentence. Can it be two sentences?

Related pages

[Building a paragraph](#)

How to organize sentences around one main idea.

[Unpacking a long sentence](#)

The same skill, used for reading.

[Understanding instructor feedback](#)

What comments such as awkward and we mean.

Grammar for college writing

GRAMMAR FOR COLLEGE WRITING

Articles: A, An, The

Use this page when you are not sure whether a noun needs a, an, the, or no article.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/grammar/articles.html>

What articles do

English has three **articles**: **a**, **an**, and **the**. An article comes before a noun. It tells your reader whether you mean one specific thing or any one of many.

- **I read an article about sleep.** The reader does not know which article. It is one of many.
- **I read the article about sleep.** The reader knows which article. Maybe the instructor assigned it.

Many languages have no articles, so this part of English takes practice. A missing article rarely stops a reader from understanding you. Still, articles appear in almost every sentence, so a small improvement shows everywhere in your writing.

KEY TERMS

Noun: a word for a person, place, thing, or idea.

Countable noun: a noun you can count. It has a plural form: one essay, two essays.

Uncountable noun: a noun you cannot count. It has no plural form: research, information.

Three questions for every noun

When you are not sure, ask these questions in order. Stop at the first “yes.”

- 1 **Does my reader know exactly which one I mean?** If yes, use **the**.
- 2 **Is the noun singular and countable?** If yes, use **a** or **an**.
- 3 **Is the noun plural or uncountable, and am I speaking in general?** If yes, use no article.

When does my reader know which one?

- **You already mentioned it. I wrote a draft. The draft was too short.**
- **Your sentence identifies it. the article that we read this week, the first paragraph**
- **There is only one. the author** of an article, **the instructor** of your class, **the sun**

A or an?

Listen to the first sound of the next word. The spelling does not decide.

- Use **a** before a consonant sound: **a draft**, **a university**, **a one-page summary**.
- Use **an** before a vowel sound: **an essay**, **an hour**, **an MLA citation**.

Example: articles in a paragraph

This paragraph comes from a student's summary. Each number matches a note below it.

A paragraph with notes

I read **an article** ① about sleep for my psychology class. **The article** ② explains that college students need at least seven hours of sleep. **Research** ③ shows that **students** ④ who sleep less have more trouble remembering information. **The author** ⑤ gives an example from **a study at a large university**. ⑥ In **the study**, ⑦ students who slept longer earned higher grades.

① First mention.

The reader does not know which article yet. The noun is singular and countable, so it needs **a** or **an**. **Article** begins with a vowel sound, so the writer uses **an**.

② Second mention.

Now the reader knows which article, so the writer uses **the**.

③ An uncountable noun, in general.

Research is uncountable. The writer means research in general, so there is no article. **Information**, later in the same sentence, works the same way.

④ A plural noun, in general.

The writer means students in general, not one specific group, so there is no article.

⑤ Only one.

The article has one author, so the reader knows which person the writer means.

⑥ Two first mentions.

The reader does not know which study or which university. **University** begins with a "y" sound, so the writer uses **a**, not **an**.

⑦ Second mention.

The study was introduced in the sentence before, so now it is **the study**.

Three common problems

WATCH FOR THESE

1. Uncountable nouns in college writing

These nouns are common in college, and all of them are uncountable in English: **research, evidence, information, advice, feedback, homework, equipment, software**. Do not use a or an with them, and do not add -s.

Uncountable nouns

Not this	Write this
I did a research.	I did research. / I read a study.
The essay needs more evidences.	The essay needs more evidence.
She gave me an advice.	She gave me some advice. / She gave me a piece of advice.
I found many informations.	I found a lot of information.
I finished my homeworks.	I finished my homework. / I finished my assignments.

2. A singular countable noun with nothing before it

A singular countable noun cannot stand alone. It needs an article or another small word such as my, this, or one. Use only one of them.

Singular countable nouns

Not this	Write this
I wrote essay about my job.	I wrote an essay about my job.
The my essay is finished.	My essay is finished.

3. The in general statements

When you speak about a whole group in general, use a plural noun with no article.

- General: **Students need feedback.** This means students everywhere.
- Specific: **The students in my group need feedback.** This means one group that the reader can identify.

Phrases you will use often

You can learn these phrases as whole pieces. The article is already correct.

TO WRITE ABOUT A READING

According to the author, _____.

The main idea of the article is _____.

In the first paragraph, _____.

TO GIVE SUPPORT

This is an example of _____.

A study by _____ shows that _____.

TO EXPLAIN YOUR OWN WRITING

The purpose of this essay is to _____.

As a result, _____.

Practice

Choose **a**, **an**, **the**, or no article for each blank.

1. I wrote _____ essay about my first job.
2. _____ essay that I wrote last week needs more support.
3. My instructor gave me _____ feedback on my draft.
4. She said that I need _____ stronger thesis.
5. I need to find _____ information about wages.
6. It took me _____ hour to revise one paragraph.
7. _____ students often work while they attend college.

Then correct this sentence: **"I did a research for my homeworks."**

Suggested answers

1. an

First mention, singular and countable. Essay begins with a vowel sound.

2. The

The words that I wrote last week identify which essay.

3. No article

Feedback is uncountable. Some feedback is also correct.

4. a

Singular and countable, and the reader does not know which thesis yet. Stronger begins with a consonant sound.

5. No article

Information is uncountable. Some information is also correct.

6. an

The h in hour is silent, so the word begins with a vowel sound.

7. No article

The sentence is about students in general. The first word is Students, with a capital letter.

Corrected sentence: I did research for my homework.

Both nouns are uncountable, so they take no a and no -s.

Next step

Try this with your own writing

1. Choose one paragraph from a draft.
2. Circle every noun.
3. Ask the three questions for each noun.
4. Check the list of uncountable nouns on this page.

More practice

The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) is a writing site from Purdue University. Many college classes use it.

Purdue OWL: article exercises (https://owl.purdue.edu/owl_exercises/grammar_exercises/articles/)

Three exercises with answer pages.

Purdue OWL: How to Use Articles (https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/using_articles.html)

A longer explanation, with rules for names of places.

Related pages

[Subject-verb agreement](#)

How to make the verb match its subject.

[Building a paragraph](#)

How to organize one main idea with support.

Subject-Verb Agreement

Use this page when you are not sure whether a verb needs -s, or whether to use is or are.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/grammar/subject-verb-agreement.html>

What subject-verb agreement means

Every English sentence has a **subject** (who or what the sentence is about) and a **verb** (what the subject does or is). In the present tense, the verb changes to match the subject. This match is called **agreement**.

- **The student works on weekends.** One student, so the verb ends in -s.
- **The students work on weekends.** More than one student, so the verb has no -s.

An agreement error rarely stops a reader from understanding you. But it happens in many sentences, so readers notice it. Most agreement follows one main rule.

KEY TERMS

Subject: the person or thing that does the action or is described.

Verb: the word that shows the action or the state, such as work, is, or has.

Singular: one. a student, the article, research

Plural: more than one. students, the articles, people

The main rule

In the present tense, when the subject is **one person or thing** (or he, she, or it), the verb ends in -s. For every other subject, it does not.

Present tense verbs

Subject	Most verbs	be	have	do
I	work	am	have	do
you, we, they, plural nouns	work	are	have	do
he, she, it, one person or thing	works	is	has	does

A QUICK CHECK

In most sentences, the -s goes on the noun or the verb, not both. **The student works. The students work.**

In the past tense, agreement matters only for be: **I was, he was, it was**, but **you were, we were, they were**.

Finding the real subject

Most agreement errors happen because the subject is hard to find. Watch for these five situations.

- 1 Words between the subject and the verb.** Cover the extra words. **The cost of textbooks is high.** The subject is cost, not textbooks.
- 2 Words such as each, every, everyone, and one of.** These are singular. **One of my classes meets online.** Everyone needs a break.
- 3 Sentences that start with There.** The subject comes after the verb. **There are two reasons. There is one reason.**
- 4 Two subjects joined by and.** Together they are plural. **My job and my classes take most of my time.**
- 5 Uncountable nouns and -ing subjects.** These are singular. **Research shows that sleep helps memory. Working full time is difficult.**

Example: agreement in a paragraph

This paragraph comes from a student's essay. Each number matches a note below it.

A paragraph with notes

Many students at community colleges **work** **1** while they take classes. **Research shows** **2** that this is common. **The number of hours that students work each week varies** **3** a lot. **There are** **4** two main reasons for this. First, **each student has** **5** different costs. Second, **balancing a job and classes takes** **6** careful planning.

- 1 A plural subject.**
The subject is **students**, so the verb has no -s.
- 2 An uncountable noun.**
Research is singular, so the verb ends in -s.
- 3 Words between.**
The subject is **number**. Cover **of hours that students work each week**, and you see **The number varies**.
- 4 There + verb.**
The subject comes after the verb: **two main reasons**. It is plural, so the verb is **are**.
- 5 Each.**
Each student means one student at a time, so the verb is **has**.

6

An -ing subject.

The subject is the whole activity: **balancing a job and classes**. One activity is singular, so the verb is **takes**.

Three common problems

WATCH FOR THESE

1. People is plural

People has no -s, but it means more than one person. Write **People are** and **Some people think**. Do not write "People is" or "people thinks." Children, men, and women work the same way.

2. No -s after does, doesn't, or a helping verb

The helping verb shows the agreement. The main verb stays in its base form.

Helping verbs

Not this

She doesn't works on Fridays.

Does the article explains the cause?

He can speaks three languages.

Write this

She doesn't work on Fridays.

Does the article explain the cause?

He can speak three languages.

3. The subject is far from the verb

Long subjects are common in college writing. Find the main noun, and match the verb to it.

- **The results of the survey show a clear pattern.** The main noun is results.
- **The author of these two articles argues that cost matters most.** The main noun is author.

Phrases you will use often

You can learn these phrases as whole pieces. The agreement is already correct.

TO USE A SOURCE

The author argues that _____

Research shows that _____.

The data suggest that _____.

TO GIVE REASONS

There are two reasons for _____.

One of the main reasons is _____.

TO WRITE ABOUT GROUPS

Many students _____.

Each student needs _____.

Some people believe that _____.

ABOUT DATA

Many instructors and style guides treat data as plural (the data show). In everyday English, people also use it as singular (the data shows). In a course that uses APA style, use the plural.

Practice

Choose the correct verb.

1. My manager (give / gives) me a new schedule every Monday.
2. The price of the books (is / are) too high for many students.
3. There (is / are) three sources in my essay.
4. Each of the students (has / have) a different topic.
5. People in my program (study / studies) together on Thursdays.
6. Writing clear sentences (take / takes) practice.

Then correct this sentence: **"The restaurant have many customers, and the manager don't likes long lines."**

Suggested answers

1. **gives**

My manager is one person.

2. **is**

The subject is price. Cover of the books.

3. **are**

The subject comes after the verb: three sources, which is plural.

4. **has**

Each is singular. Cover of the students.

5. **study**

People is plural.

6. **takes**

The subject is one activity: writing clear sentences.

Corrected sentence: The restaurant has many customers, and the manager doesn't like long lines.

Restaurant and manager are each one thing, so the verbs are has and doesn't. After doesn't, the main verb has no -s.

Next step

Try this with your own writing

1. Choose one paragraph from a draft.
2. Underline every present-tense verb.
3. For each verb, ask: what is the subject? Cover any words between them.
4. Is the subject one thing? Then the verb needs -s (or is, has, does).

More practice

The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) is a writing site from Purdue University. Many college classes use it.

[Purdue OWL: subject and verb agreement exercise](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl_exercises/sentence_structure/subject_verb_agreement/subject_verb_agreement_exercise.html)

(https://owl.purdue.edu/owl_exercises/sentence_structure/subject_verb_agreement/subject_verb_agreement_exercise.html)

An exercise with an answer page.

[Purdue OWL: Subject/Verb Agreement](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/subject_verb_agreement.html) (https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/subject_verb_agreement.html)

A longer explanation, with more special cases.

Related pages

[Articles: a, an, the](#)

Including which nouns are uncountable, and so singular.

[Verb tense: staying consistent](#)

How to choose a time for your writing and keep it.

[Sentence boundaries: fragments and run-ons](#)

How to tell where one sentence ends and the next begins.

Verb Tense: Staying Consistent

Use this page when your writing moves between past, present, and future, and you want the time to stay clear.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/grammar/verb-tense.html>

Why verb tense matters

The **tense** of a verb tells your reader *when* something happens: in the past, now, or in the future. When the tense changes without a reason, the reader loses track of time.

- Unclear: **Last week I go to the library, and I found two sources.** Did this happen last week, or does it happen every week?
- Clear: **Last week I went to the library, and I found two sources.**

Choose a main time, and change the tense only when the time changes.

KEY TERMS

Tense: the form of a verb that shows time, such as work, worked, will work.

Base form: the verb with no ending: work, go, write.

Irregular verb: a verb whose past form does not end in -ed, such as go, went.

Shift: a change from one tense to another.

Three tenses you will use most in college

Common tenses in college writing

Tense	Use it for	Example
Simple present	Facts and habits. What a text or an author says.	The author argues that sleep affects memory.
Simple past	Finished events. Your experiences. What a study did.	Last year I worked at a clinic. The researchers surveyed 200 students.
Present perfect (has or have + past participle)	Something that started in the past and continues now, or a past action at no specific time.	I have worked there for two years. Researchers have found similar results.

WRITING ABOUT A READING

Many college classes expect the present tense for what an author says. This is especially true in English classes that use MLA style: **The author explains**, not “The author explained.” The text still says it today. Classes that use APA style often use the past tense for what a study found: **The study found**. If you are not sure, ask your instructor.

Example: tense in a paragraph

This paragraph comes from a student’s response to a reading. The tense changes four times, and each change has a reason. Each number matches a note below it.

A paragraph with notes

In her article, the author argues **1** that small study breaks improve focus. She describes a study in which students took a five-minute break every half hour. **2** I have studied without breaks for most of my life, **3** so I was not sure. Last week, I tried her method. **4** I set a timer and took short walks. Now I think **5** she is right. Next week, I will use the timer **6** for my biology reading too.

1 Present: what the author says.

The article still says this today.

2 Past, inside the present.

She describes is present, because the article describes it now. **Students took** is past, because the study is finished.

3 Present perfect.

This started long ago and is true until now.

4 Past, with a time word.

Last week signals the change. The next sentence stays in the past.

5 Back to present.

Now signals the change.

6 Future.

Next week signals the change. After **will**, use the base form.

Three common problems

WATCH FOR THESE

1. A shift with no reason

Inside one story or one event, keep one tense. A story about last semester stays in the past.

Shifts inside one event

Not this	Write this
When a customer was angry, I listen and I try to help.	When a customer was angry, I listened and tried to help.
The author explains the problem and gave three solutions.	The author explains the problem and gives three solutions.

2. Irregular past forms

Many common verbs do not use -ed in the past. These appear often in college writing:

Common irregular verbs

Base	Past	Past participle (after have)
write	wrote	written
read	read (sounds like “red”)	read
find	found	found
think	thought	thought
teach	taught	taught
take	took	taken
give	gave	given
choose	chose	chosen

3. Two past forms together

After did, didn’t, or will, use the base form. The helping verb already shows the time.

- Write **I didn’t finish the reading.** Do not write “I didn’t finished.”
- Write **Did you submit the essay?** Do not write “Did you submitted?”

Phrases you will use often

Each phrase sets a time. Keep the same tense in the sentences that follow, until the time changes.

PRESENT: A READING

The author explains that _____.

In this article, _____.

PAST: AN EXPERIENCE

Last semester, I _____.

When I started _____, I _____.

PRESENT PERFECT: UP TO NOW

I have _____ for _____ years.

Researchers have found that _____.

FUTURE: A PLAN

Next time, I will _____.

Practice

Choose the correct verb.

1. Last summer, I (work / worked) at a warehouse.
2. In the article, the author (says / said) that cost is the main problem.
3. I (have lived / lived) in Owensboro since 2020.
4. I didn't (understand / understood) the second question.
5. Yesterday I (write / wrote) my outline.

Then correct the tense shift in this paragraph: **"On my first day, I was nervous. I walk into the room and sit in the back. The instructor smiled and asks my name."**

Suggested answers

1. worked

Last summer is finished.

2. says

Use the present for what a text says. In some classes, said is accepted. Ask your instructor.

3. have lived

Since 2020 means from then until now.

4. understand

After didn't, use the base form.

5. wrote

Write is irregular. Its past form is wrote.

Corrected paragraph: On my first day, I was nervous. I walked into the room and sat in the back. The instructor smiled and asked my name.

The whole story is about one finished day, so every verb is past. Sit is irregular: sat.

Next step

Try this with your own writing

1. Choose one paragraph from a draft.
2. Underline every verb.
3. Above each one, write *past*, *present*, or *future*.
4. Where the tense changes, look for a reason, such as a time word. If there is no reason, change the verb.

More practice

The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) is a writing site from Purdue University. Many college classes use it.

[Purdue OWL: tense consistency exercises](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl_exercises/grammar_exercises/tense_consistency/tense_consistency_exercise_1.html)

(https://owl.purdue.edu/owl_exercises/grammar_exercises/tense_consistency/tense_consistency_exercise_1.html)

The first of four exercises, each with an answer page.

[Purdue OWL: Verb Tense Consistency](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/verb_tenses/verb_tense_consistency.html)

(https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/verb_tenses/verb_tense_consistency.html)

A longer explanation of when to shift tense.

Related pages

[Writing a journal or reflection](#)

How a reflection moves between past, present, and future.

[Subject-verb agreement](#)

How to make a present-tense verb match its subject.

[Sentence boundaries: fragments and run-ons](#)

How to tell where one sentence ends and the next begins.

Sentence Boundaries: Fragments and Run-ons

Use this page when you are not sure where one sentence should end and the next should begin.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/grammar/sentence-boundaries.html>

What a complete sentence needs

A complete sentence has three parts: a **subject**, a **verb**, and a **complete idea**. It can stand alone and make sense.

- **I work full time.** Subject (I), verb (work), complete idea.

Two kinds of problems happen at the edges of sentences:

- A **fragment** is a piece of a sentence written as if it were complete. **Because I work full time.**
- A **run-on** is two complete sentences joined with no correct connection. **I work full time I take two classes.** When only a comma joins them, it is called a **comma splice**: **I work full time, I take two classes.**

Both problems make readers stop and read again, because they cannot tell where one idea ends and the next begins.

KEY TERMS

Independent clause: a subject and verb with a complete idea. It can be a sentence by itself.

Dependent clause: a subject and verb that start with a word such as because, when, or although. It cannot stand alone.

Fragment: an incomplete sentence.

Run-on and comma splice: two sentences joined incorrectly.

Finding and fixing fragments

To **test a sentence**, read it alone, out of the paragraph. Could you say it to someone as a complete statement? If it leaves them waiting for more, it is a fragment.

Three common fragments

- 1 **A dependent clause alone.** It starts with a word such as because, although, when, if, or since. **Because I work full time.**
- 2 **An example alone.** It starts with for example, such as, or like, but it has no verb. **For example, my biology class.**
- 3 **A missing subject or verb.** **Is important to plan ahead.** (no subject) **The students in my group.** (no verb)

Two ways to fix a fragment

Fixing fragments

Fragment	Fix 1: join it to the sentence next to it	Fix 2: add what is missing
I study at night. Because I work full time.	I study at night because I work full time.	I work full time.
Some classes are hard. For example, my biology class.	Some classes are hard, such as my biology class.	For example, my biology class is hard.
Is important to plan ahead.	Not needed	It is important to plan ahead.

Fixing run-ons and comma splices

When two complete sentences meet, connect them in one of four ways.

Four ways to connect two sentences

Way	Example
1. A period	I work full time. I take two classes.
2. A comma + and, but, so, or, yet	I work full time, but I take two classes.
3. A semicolon (;)	I work full time; I take two classes.
4. A word such as because, although, while	Although I work full time, I take two classes.

Choose the way that shows the relationship. But and although show contrast. So shows a result. A period is always correct and is often the clearest choice.

Example: sentence boundaries in a paragraph

This paragraph comes from a student's essay. Each number matches a note below it.

A paragraph with notes

Online classes are a good choice for many working adults. ¹ They let students study at any time, so a night shift is not a problem. ² However, online classes need strong time management. ³ When I took my first online class, I fell behind in the second week. ⁴ Now I plan every week on Sunday; this habit keeps me on schedule. ⁵

- ¹ One independent clause.
Subject (**online classes**), verb (**are**), and a complete idea.

2 Comma + so.

Two complete sentences, joined correctly. **So** shows a result.

3 However starts a new sentence.

However cannot join two sentences with only a comma. See the box below.

4 A dependent clause, attached.

When I took my first online class cannot stand alone, so it is joined to a complete sentence with a comma.

5 A semicolon.

The two sentences are closely related, so the writer uses a semicolon. A period would also be correct.

Two common problems

WATCH FOR THESE

1. However, therefore, and for example between two sentences

These words connect ideas, but they cannot join two sentences with only a comma. Use a period or a semicolon before them.

Connecting words between sentences

Not this	Write this
The class is online, however, it has live meetings.	The class is online. However, it has live meetings.
I missed the deadline, therefore, I lost points.	I missed the deadline; therefore, I lost points.

2. A comma between two long sentences

When a sentence feels long, a writer may add a comma to give the reader a pause. A comma cannot hold two complete sentences together by itself. Read each half alone. If both halves are complete, use one of the four ways.

- Comma splice: "My manager changed my schedule, I had to drop my morning class."
- Fixed: **My manager changed my schedule, so I had to drop my morning class.**

Patterns you will use often

The punctuation in each pattern is already correct. Fill in each blank with a complete idea.

TO SHOW A REASON

_____ because _____.

Because _____, _____.

TO SHOW A CONTRAST

_____, but _____.

Although _____, _____.

_____. However, _____.

TO SHOW A RESULT

_____, so _____.

_____; therefore, _____.

TO GIVE AN EXAMPLE

For example, _____ is _____.

WITH BECAUSE

When because comes first, put a comma after the first part: **Because I work at night, I study in the morning.** When it comes in the middle, you usually do not need a comma: **I study in the morning because I work at night.**

Practice

Is each one a complete sentence, a fragment, or a comma splice?

1. Although the reading was long.
2. The reading was long, it had many new words.
3. The reading was long, but it was interesting.
4. For example, the second chapter.
5. Studying with a partner helps me remember new words.

Then fix this paragraph: **"I chose nursing. Because I like helping people. My first class was difficult, I studied every night. However, I passed."**

Suggested answers

1. Fragment.

It starts with although, so it needs a second part: Although the reading was long, I finished it.

2. Comma splice.

Both halves are complete. Use a period, a semicolon, or a comma + and.

3. Complete sentence.

A comma + but joins the two sentences correctly.

4. Fragment.

It has no verb. Add one: For example, the second chapter was very long.

5. Complete sentence.

The subject is studying with a partner, and the verb is helps.

One possible answer: I chose nursing because I like helping people. My first class was difficult, so I studied every night. However, I passed.

The because fragment joins the sentence before it. The comma splice gets so, which shows a result. The last sentence was already correct: However starts a new sentence. Other answers are possible.

Next step

Try this with your own writing

1. Read your draft from the last sentence to the first. Out of order, each sentence must stand on its own.
2. For each sentence, ask: does it have a subject, a verb, and a complete idea?
3. Look at every comma. If the words on both sides are complete sentences, use one of the four ways.
4. Look for however and therefore. Is there a period or a semicolon before them?

More practice

The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) is a writing site from Purdue University. Many college classes use it.

[Purdue OWL: sentence fragment exercises](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl_exercises/sentence_structure/sentence_fragments_exercises/index.html)

(https://owl.purdue.edu/owl_exercises/sentence_structure/sentence_fragments_exercises/index.html)

Exercises with answer pages.

[Purdue OWL: run-ons and comma splices exercise](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl_exercises/sentence_structure/sentence_structure/run_ons_comma_splices_and_fused_sentences.html)

(https://owl.purdue.edu/owl_exercises/sentence_structure/sentence_structure/run_ons_comma_splices_and_fused_sentences.html)

An exercise with an answer page.

[Purdue OWL: Sentence Fragments](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/mechanics/sentence_fragments.html) (https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/mechanics/sentence_fragments.html)

A longer explanation of fragments.

[Purdue OWL: Run-ons, Comma Splices, and Fused Sentences](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/punctuation/independent_and_dependent_clauses/runonsentences.html)

(https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/punctuation/independent_and_dependent_clauses/runonsentences.html)

A longer explanation of run-ons.

Related pages

[Subject-verb agreement](#)

How to find the subject and match the verb.

[Verb tense: staying consistent](#)

How to choose a time for your writing and keep it.

[Building a paragraph](#)

How to organize one main idea with support.

Revise and use feedback

REVISE AND USE FEEDBACK

Understanding Instructor Feedback

Use this page when you get a graded assignment back and want to know what your instructor is asking you to change.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/feedback/understanding-instructor-feedback.html>

What feedback is for

Feedback is information about your work: what is working, and what to change. Your grade tells you how the work did. Your feedback tells you how to make the next work better.

- **Many comments are normal.** A long list of comments does not mean your work is bad. It means your instructor read it carefully.
- **Comments are about the work, not about you.** Every writer, including your instructor, gets feedback.
- **Feedback is part of the course.** Instructors expect you to read it and use it in your next draft or assignment.

KEY TERMS

Feedback: comments on your work that help you improve it.

Inline comment: a comment in your document, next to the exact words it is about. It is also called an annotation.

Revise: to change your writing to make it better, especially its ideas and organization.

Edit: to correct smaller things, such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Where to find your feedback in Blackboard

Your feedback can be in four places. Many students read only the grade and miss the rest. Check all four. Where each one appears depends on the kind of assignment. If you cannot find your feedback, ask your instructor where to look.

Four kinds of feedback in Blackboard

Kind	Where it is	What it is good for
Overall feedback	With your grade on the assignment.	Your instructor's main points about the whole assignment. Read this first.
Inline comments	Inside your submitted file. Open the file to see them. Comments appear next to highlighted words.	The exact sentence or paragraph each comment is about. Most English courses use these often.

Kind	Where it is	What it is good for
Rubric comments	In the rubric, next to each criterion.	Which part of the rubric each comment is about, and the level you earned.
Recorded feedback	A video or audio player in the overall feedback.	Your instructor's voice and tone, and the main ideas.

OPEN THE FILE

Inline comments are easy to miss. If your instructor says “see my comments on your paper,” open your submitted file, not only the grade. On a phone, the comments can be hard to read. Use a computer if you can.

Recorded feedback: three tools that help

Hearing feedback can feel more personal than reading it. That is normal. Your instructor chose a recording to help you, and these tools make it easier to use:

1 Captions. Select the captions button, a small square in the player, to see the words as your instructor speaks.

2 Playback speed. Select the three-dot menu, then Playback speed. A slower speed, such as 0.75, can make the recording easier to follow.

3 Transcript. In the same three-dot menu, select Transcript to read the whole recording as text. You can come back to one point without playing the whole video.

Captions and transcripts are made by a computer, so they can have small errors. If a word does not make sense, listen to that part again.

Short comments and marks

Inline comments are often very short. Many instructors use abbreviations. Here are common ones. Your instructor may use different marks, so check the syllabus, or ask.

Common feedback abbreviations

Mark	Means	What to do
awk	awkward	The sentence is hard to read. Say it more simply.
frag	fragment	The sentence is incomplete. See Sentence boundaries .
RO / CS	run-on / comma splice	Two sentences are joined incorrectly. See Sentence boundaries .
agr / SV	agreement / subject-verb	The verb does not match its subject. See Subject-verb agreement .

Mark	Means	What to do
vt / t	verb tense	The tense changes without a reason. See Verb tense .
art	article	Add, remove, or change a, an, or the. See Articles .
ww / wc	wrong word / word choice	The word does not fit the meaning. Look it up, or ask.
cite	citation needed	Say where this idea or fact came from.
¶	new paragraph	Start a new paragraph here.
?	unclear	The reader did not understand. Explain more clearly.

Example: overall feedback

Here is an instructor's overall feedback on a first draft. Each number matches a note below.

Overall feedback with notes

Your topic is interesting, and your personal example in paragraph 2 is strong. ¹ You might consider stating your main point in the first paragraph. ² I wonder if your third paragraph belongs in this essay. ³ Watch your verb tenses when you describe last summer; I marked three examples. ⁴ This is a good start. ⁵

¹ What is working.

Keep this in your next draft.

² A request, worded politely.

You might consider sounds optional, but it usually means: please do this.

³ A request, worded as a thought.

I wonder if usually means: I do not think this paragraph fits. Remove it, or explain how it connects.

⁴ A pattern.

The instructor marked three examples, not every error. Fix those three, then find the others yourself.

⁵ Encouragement, and a signal.

The draft is on the right track, and it still needs revision.

Language focus: polite requests in feedback

LANGUAGE FOCUS

When a suggestion is really a request

Many U.S. instructors soften their feedback to be kind. They write a request as a suggestion, a question, or a thought. Read these phrases as requests unless your instructor says they are optional.

What softened feedback usually means

The comment says	It usually means
You might consider adding an example.	Add an example.
It would help to explain this more.	Explain this more.
I wonder if this paragraph fits.	This paragraph may not belong. Remove it or connect it.
What do you mean here?	This part is unclear. Rewrite it so a reader understands.
Could you say more about this?	Add more explanation or detail here.
Have you thought about the other side?	Discuss an opposing view.

WATCH FOR THIS

A question in your feedback, such as “What do you mean here?”, usually does not need an answer to your instructor. It needs a change in your writing. If you are not sure, ask.

Make a revision plan

Feedback from four places can feel like a lot. Put it in one list. Then work from the list, starting at the top.

- 1 Read the overall feedback first.** Write down your instructor's main points.
- 2 Read the rubric comments.** Add any point you do not have yet.
- 3 Read the inline comments.** Group them. Five comments about verb tense are one item: “fix verb tense.”
- 4 Put the big changes first.** Revise ideas and organization before you edit grammar. A paragraph you remove does not need its grammar fixed.

Sentence starters

Use these for your revision plan and for questions to your instructor. Fill in each blank with your own words.

FOR YOUR PLAN

My instructor wants me to _____.

First, I will _____. Then I will _____.

TO ASK ABOUT A COMMENT

In your comment on paragraph _____, you wrote “_____.” Could you tell me what I should change?

TO CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

I think your comment means that I should _____. Is that right?

Practice

1. Your instructor wrote “**You might consider adding a source here.**” What should you do?
2. You see **frag** next to a sentence. What is the problem?
3. Your grade appears in Blackboard, with one line of overall feedback: “**See my comments on your paper.**” Where are the comments?
4. Your feedback includes these three items. Which should you work on first?
 - A. Several article errors in paragraph 3.
 - B. Your thesis does not answer the prompt.
 - C. One spelling error.

Suggested answers

1. Add a source.

You might consider is a polite way to make a request.

2. The sentence is incomplete.

It is missing a subject, a verb, or a complete idea. See [Sentence boundaries](#).

3. Inside your submitted file.

Open the file you turned in. The comments appear next to highlighted words.

4. B.

A thesis that does not answer the prompt affects the whole essay. Fix the big changes first, then edit grammar and spelling.

Next step

The next time you get feedback

1. Check all four places: overall feedback, inline comments, the rubric, and any recording.
2. Write one revision plan, with the big changes first.
3. Read polite suggestions as requests.
4. If you do not understand a comment, ask your instructor or a tutor. Bring the comment with you.

Related pages

[Reading a rubric](#)

How criteria and levels work.

[Working with a tutor](#)

A tutor can help you understand feedback and plan a revision.

[Emailing an instructor and asking questions](#)

How to ask about a comment in writing.

[Using AI to learn](#)

A Copilot prompt that explains grammar patterns without rewriting your work.

FOR INSTRUCTORS

[Focused, actionable feedback](#)

The Instructor Companion page that pairs with this one.

Use sources

USE SOURCES

Quote, Paraphrase, or Summarize

Use this page when you need to use a source in your writing and want to do it correctly.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/sources/quote-paraphrase-summarize.html>

Three ways to use a source

Many college assignments ask you to use **sources**: articles, books, websites, or interviews. There are three ways to bring a source into your writing. In all three, you must say where the idea came from. This is called **citing** the source.

Quote, paraphrase, and summary

Way	What you write	Length	Use it when
Quote	The author's exact words, inside quotation marks	Usually short: a phrase or one sentence	The exact words matter, or they are hard to say better
Paraphrase	One idea from the source, in your own words and your own sentence structure	About the same length as the original	You need the details of one idea
Summary	The main idea of a longer passage, in your own words	Much shorter than the original	You need the big idea, not the details

In most college writing, paraphrase and summary are more common than quotation. Instructors want to see that you understand the source well enough to explain it.

KEY TERMS

Source: a text, person, or recording that you take information from.

Cite: to say where an idea or words came from, in the style your instructor asks for, such as MLA or APA.

Plagiarism: using someone else's words or ideas without citing them.

Example: one source, used three ways

Here is a short passage from an article. Below it, a student uses it three ways. Each number matches a note.

One passage and three uses, with notes

Original passage: Students who work more than twenty hours a week are less likely to finish their degree. The problem is not ability; it is time. When work schedules change without warning, students miss classes, fall behind, and often leave college.

Quote: According to the author, “The problem is not ability; it is time.” 1

Paraphrase: The author explains that when employers change work hours with little notice, students may skip classes and stop keeping up with the work, and many of them leave college. 2

Summary: The author argues that long and unpredictable work hours, not a lack of ability, keep many students from finishing college. 3

1 A quote.

The exact words are inside quotation marks. The writer chose a short sentence that is strong and hard to say better.

2 A paraphrase.

It covers one idea, the third sentence, with new words and a new sentence structure. It is about the same length.

3 A summary.

It gives the main idea of the whole passage in one sentence.

In a real essay, each use also needs a citation in your instructor’s style. For MLA and APA help, see [OCTC citation help](https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/Bb_Start_Here/citation-help.html) (https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/Bb_Start_Here/citation-help.html).

How to paraphrase without copying

Changing a few words in the author’s sentence is not a paraphrase. If the sentence structure and most of the words stay the same, it is still too close to the original. Many instructors count this as plagiarism, even with a citation.

Too close, and a real paraphrase

Original	Too close	Real paraphrase
Students who work more than twenty hours a week are less likely to finish their degree.	Students who have jobs more than twenty hours a week are less likely to complete their degree.	Working over twenty hours a week makes it harder for students to graduate.

Four steps

1 Read the passage until you understand it. Look up any words you need.

2 Close the source, or cover it.

3 Write the idea from memory, as if you were explaining it to a classmate.

4 Compare. If your version uses the same structure or many of the same words, try again. Keep special terms that have no other word, such as GPA.

PARAPHRASING TOOLS

Some websites and AI tools offer to paraphrase for you. They write the new sentence, so the tool is leading, not you. Use one only if your instructor allows it. See [Translation, grammar tools, and AI: check the rules first](#).

Language focus: reporting verbs

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Verbs that introduce a source

When you use a source, start with a **signal phrase**: the author's name or the author, plus a **reporting verb**. The verb tells the reader what the author does with the idea.

Reporting verbs

The author	Reporting verbs	Example
gives information	explains, describes, reports	The author explains that schedules often change.
takes a position	argues, claims, believes	The author argues that time is the real problem.
offers an idea carefully	suggests, notes	The author suggests that employers could help.
reports research	found, shows	The study found that students who work long hours leave more often.

WATCH FOR THIS

After a reporting verb, use that + a complete sentence: **The author argues that time is the problem.** Do not write "The author argues about that time is the problem."

Use the present tense for what an author says (argues, explains). See [Verb tense](#) for when a class uses the past tense instead.

Sentence starters

Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO QUOTE

As _____ writes, "_____."

According to _____, "_____."

TO PARAPHRASE

_____ explains that _____.

TO SUMMARIZE

In this article, _____ argues that _____.

The main idea of _____ is that _____.

TO RESPOND

This idea is important because _____.

I agree with _____, but _____.

Practice

Use this original sentence: "Community colleges serve many adult students who return to school after years in the workforce."

1. Is this a quote, a paraphrase, or a summary? **The author notes that many adults go back to school at community colleges after working for years.**
2. Is this a real paraphrase or too close? **Community colleges help many adult students who go back to school after years in the workforce.**
3. Choose the best reporting verb for an author who takes a position: **The author (describes / argues) that colleges should offer evening classes.**
4. Correct this sentence: **"The author explains about that adults return to school."**

Suggested answers

1. A paraphrase.

It gives the same idea in new words and a new structure, at about the same length. It has no quotation marks.

2. Too close.

It keeps the structure and most of the words. Only two words changed.

3. argues

Should shows a position. Describes is for information.

4. The author explains that adults return to school.

After a reporting verb, use that + a complete sentence, with no about.

Next step

Before you use a source in your writing

1. Decide: do I need the exact words, one idea, or the main idea?
2. If I paraphrase, did I close the source and write from memory?
3. Did I start with a signal phrase and a reporting verb?
4. Did I cite the source in the style my instructor asks for?

More practice

The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) is a writing site from Purdue University. Many college classes use it.

[Purdue OWL: paraphrase exercises](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl_exercises/multilingual_exercises/paraphrase_and_summary_exercises/intermediate_paraphrase_exercises.html)

(https://owl.purdue.edu/owl_exercises/multilingual_exercises/paraphrase_and_summary_exercises/intermediate_paraphrase_exercises.html)

Practice with short passages.

[Purdue OWL: Quoting, Paraphrasing, and Summarizing](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/using_research/quoting_paraphrasing_and_summarizing/index.html)

(https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/using_research/quoting_paraphrasing_and_summarizing/index.html)

A longer explanation of all three.

Related pages

[Building a paragraph](#)

Where a source fits in a paragraph: support, then explain.

[Using context clues](#)

How to understand new words in a source.

[Keeping a record of your writing process](#)

How to keep notes on your sources.

Ask for help

ASK FOR HELP

Emailing an Instructor and Asking Questions

Use this page when you have a question for your instructor and want to ask it clearly in writing.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/help/emailing-an-instructor.html>

Before you write

Instructors get many emails every day. A clear, specific email gets a faster and more useful answer. Before you write, take two minutes to check three places. Many answers are already there.

1 The syllabus. It has due dates, policies, and how to contact your instructor.

2 The assignment directions. They have the requirements and often the rubric.

3 Course announcements in Blackboard. Changes often appear here first.

If you still have a question, write. Asking is normal. Instructors expect questions, and a good question shows that you take the course seriously.

What instructors expect

- **Use the method in the syllabus.** Some instructors want email at your college address. Others want a message in Blackboard.
- **Use the name your instructor asks for.** If you are not sure, write **Professor** + last name.
- **Write one email for one topic.** Two different questions are easier to answer in two short emails.
- **Give your instructor time to answer.** The syllabus often says how soon your instructor replies. Write early, not an hour before a due date.

KEY TERMS

Subject line: the short title of an email. It tells the reader what the email is about.

Greeting: the first line, such as Dear Professor Lee,

Closing: the last line before your name, such as Thank you,

Section: one class meeting group of a course. Your instructor may teach several sections of the same course.

Six parts of a clear email

1 **Subject line.** Name the course and the topic. **ENG 101: Question about Essay 2 sources**

2 **Greeting.** Dear Professor Lee, or Hello Professor Lee,

3 **Who you are.** Your name and your course. Add the section or meeting time if you know it.

4 **Your question or request.** Be specific. Say what you already checked.

5 **Thanks.** One short sentence is enough.

6 **Closing and your full name.** Thank you, then your first and last name.

tone

An email to an instructor is more formal than a text message. Use complete sentences. Do not start with Hey, and do not use abbreviations such as u or pls.

Example: an email with a question

A student read the assignment directions and still had a question. Each number matches a note below the email.

An email with notes

Subject: ENG 101: Question about Essay 2 sources 1

Dear Professor Lee, 2

My name is Ana Reyes, and I am in your Tuesday and Thursday ENG 101 class. 3 I read the directions for Essay 2 and the rubric. 4 Could you tell me whether an interview can count as one of the two sources? 5 I would like to interview my supervisor about the topic.

Thank you for your help. 6

Sincerely,
Ana Reyes

1 **A clear subject line.**
The instructor knows the course and the topic before opening the email.

- 2 **A polite greeting.**
A title and the last name, followed by a comma.
- 3 **Who the student is.**
The instructor teaches several sections, so the meeting days help.
- 4 **What the student already checked.**
This shows that the question is not in the directions.
- 5 **One specific question.**
It can be answered quickly. The word order is the order of a statement, not a question. See the language focus below.
- 6 **Thanks, a closing, and a full name.**
The full name helps the instructor find the student in the gradebook.

If you missed class

Do not ask “Did I miss anything important?” Everything in class is important. Instead, check the course materials first, and then ask what you need to do.

- **I was absent on Tuesday. I read the slides in Blackboard and finished the reading. Is there anything else I should do before Thursday?**

If you have a reason that the syllabus asks you to report, such as illness or a work emergency, say so briefly. You do not need to share private details.

Language focus: indirect questions

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Questions inside polite phrases

In an email, many questions begin with a polite phrase such as *Could you tell me* or *I would like to know*. The question that follows is called an **indirect question**. It uses the word order of a statement: subject first, then verb. It does not use *do*, *does*, or *did*.

Direct and indirect questions

Direct question	Indirect question
Where is the rubric?	Could you tell me where the rubric is ?
When is the essay due?	I would like to know when the essay is due.
How do I submit the file?	Could you explain how I submit the file?

Direct question

Indirect question

Can an interview count as a source?

Could you tell me **whether** an interview can count as a source?

WATCH FOR THIS

After **Could you tell me**, put the subject before the verb. Write **Could you tell me when the quiz is?** Do not write "Could you tell me when is the quiz?"

For a yes-or-no question, use **whether** or **if**: **Could you tell me if late work is accepted?**

The question mark goes at the end when the whole sentence is a question (Could you tell me...?). Use a period when the sentence is a statement (I would like to know...).

Sentence starters

Fill in each blank with your own words.

SUBJECT LINE

_____: Question about _____

_____: Request to meet about _____

WHO YOU ARE

My name is _____, and I am in your _____ class.

WHAT YOU CHECKED

I read _____, but I am not sure _____.

YOUR QUESTION

Could you tell me whether _____?

Could you explain what _____ means in the directions?

TO ASK FOR A MEETING

Could we meet during your office hours on _____?

Would you have time to meet on _____ or _____?

TO CLOSE

Thank you for your help.

Thank you for your time.

Practice

1. Which subject line is the most useful?
 - A. Question
 - B. HELP!!!
 - C. BIO 135: Question about the lab report format
2. Correct this question: **“Could you tell me when is the next quiz?”**
3. Change this to an indirect question that begins with Could you tell me: **“Do we need a title page?”**
4. What three parts are missing from this email? **“hey when is the essay due”**

Suggested answers

1. **C.**
It names the course and the topic. A and B do not tell the instructor what the email is about.
2. **Could you tell me when the next quiz is?**
In an indirect question, the subject (the next quiz) comes before the verb (is).
3. **Could you tell me whether we need a title page?**
It is a yes-or-no question, so use whether or if. Do not use do.
4. **Any three of these: a greeting, who the student is, which course, what they checked, a thank-you, and a full name.**
Also, the due date is usually in the syllabus or in Blackboard. Check there first.

Next step

Check your email before you send it

1. Did I check the syllabus, the directions, and the announcements first?
2. Does the subject line name the course and the topic?
3. Did I use a greeting with my instructor’s name?
4. Did I say who I am and which class I am in?
5. Is my question specific? Did I say what I already checked?
6. Did I end with thanks and my full name?

Related pages

[Interacting in class: common expectations](#)

How to ask questions in class, and what office hours are.

[Working with a tutor](#)

Another place to get help with your coursework.

[Understanding a writing prompt](#)

How to find the answer in the directions before you ask.

[Translation, grammar tools, and AI: check the rules first](#)

How to ask whether a tool is allowed.

Working with a Tutor

Use this page when you are thinking about getting help from a tutor, or you are getting ready for your first session.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/help/working-with-a-tutor.html>

What a tutor does

A **tutor** is a person who helps you with your coursework outside of class. A tutor can explain an idea again, work through a problem with you, look at your writing with you, and help you plan how to study.

A tutor helps you do your own work. A tutor does not do the work for you, and does not give you a grade.

What to know before you go

Nobody always says these things out loud. In U.S. colleges, they are true for every student.

- **Going to a tutor is normal.** It does not mean you are failing. Many students with high grades use tutoring often.
- **Instructors see it as a good sign.** It shows that you take responsibility for your learning.
- **You do not need a big problem.** One question is enough.
- **Earlier is better.** A tutor can help you more a week before the due date than an hour before it.

AT OCTC

Tutoring in the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) is free for OCTC students. The TLC asks students to make an appointment for help with writing. For this term's hours and the TLC's phone number and email, see [This semester](#).

KEY TERMS

Tutor: a person who helps you with coursework outside of class.

Peer tutor: a student who is trained to tutor other students.

Session: one meeting with a tutor.

Appointment: a time that you reserve before you come.

Walk-in: help that you can get without an appointment.

When to go

Go to a tutor when one of these is true:

- You do not understand part of a lecture or a reading.
- You are falling behind in a class.

- Your test grades are lower than you want.
- You want help preparing for a test.
- You are stuck on a homework assignment.
- You do not know how to start a paper or make an outline.
- You are not sure how to do research or use sources.
- You need help using a computer or a program for class.
- You want help organizing your time and your materials.

Example: starting a session

The first minute of a session matters. If you say clearly what you need, the tutor can start helping immediately. Here is what one student says. Each number matches a note below.

What a student says, with notes

Hi, my name is Ana. I have an appointment at 10:00 for help with writing. 1

I am in English 101 with Professor Lee. 2

I am writing an essay that argues for a change at my workplace. Here is the prompt, and here is my draft. 3

My instructor said that my reasons are too general. Could we look at my second paragraph? 4

At the end of the session

So my next step is to add an example to each reason. Is that right? 5

1 Who you are and why you came.

Ana gives her name, her appointment time, and the kind of help she wants.

2 Your class and your instructor.

The tutor needs these to understand the assignment. Tutors also write them on a form for the tutoring center.

3 The assignment itself.

Ana brings the prompt and her draft. The tutor can read exactly what the instructor asked for.

4 One specific request.

Ana does not say "Is this good?" She names one problem and one place to look. **Could we** makes the request polite.

5 A check before leaving.

Ana says her next step in her own words and asks whether it is correct. Now she knows what to do after the session.

Language focus: asking for exactly what you need

LANGUAGE FOCUS

From general to specific

A specific question gets a more useful answer. Say what you already understand, and then say where you get lost.

Making a request more useful

Too general	More useful
I don't understand anything.	I understand the first step, but I get lost at the second one.
Is my paper good?	Does my first paragraph answer the prompt?
Can you fix my grammar?	Could you show me one kind of error that I make often?

Polite requests

These three forms are polite and common. The first two are followed by the simple form of the verb. After *Would you mind*, the verb ends in *-ing*.

- **Could you explain that another way?**
- **Could we look at my second paragraph?**
- **Would you mind explaining that again?**

WATCH FOR THIS

A tutor may ask, **"Do you mind if I write on your draft?"** If it is fine with you, the answer is **"No, I don't mind"** or **"No, go ahead."** Here, *no* means "it is not a problem."

Sentence starters

Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO MAKE AN APPOINTMENT

I would like to make an appointment for help with _____.

I am free on _____. Is there a time then?

TO BEGIN A SESSION

I am working on _____ for _____, and I am stuck on _____.

WHEN YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND

Could you explain that another way?

Could you show me an example?

Could you say that more slowly, please?

TO CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

So I should _____. Is that right?

TO END A SESSION

Thank you. This helped me with _____.

May I come back after I revise?

Practice

1. Which two are good reasons to see a tutor?
 - A. I got a low grade on my first test.
 - B. I want someone to write my conclusion.
 - C. I do not know how to start my outline.
2. Make this request more useful: **"I don't understand anything about this assignment."**
3. A tutor asks: **"Do you mind if I write on your draft?"** It is fine with you. What do you say?
4. Your paper is due in eight days. When is the best time to see a tutor: this week, or the night before the paper is due?
5. Name three things to bring to a session about a writing assignment.

Suggested answers

1. A and C.

A tutor can help you prepare for the next test and plan your outline. B asks the tutor to do your work, and a tutor will not do that.

2. One possible answer: "I understand the topic, but I am not sure what 'analyze' means in the prompt."

Say what you understand, and then name the part that is unclear. Other answers are possible.

3. "No, I don't mind." or "No, go ahead."

After Do you mind, the word no means that it is not a problem.

4. This week.

You will have time to use what you learn. You may also need an appointment, and times fill up.

5. The prompt, your draft, and your class notes.

Your syllabus, your textbook, and any handouts also help. Know your instructor's name and the name of your class.

Next step

Get ready for your first session

1. Check the hours for this term on [This semester](#).
2. Make an appointment if you need one.
3. Gather your prompt, your draft or notes, your syllabus, and your textbook.
4. Write down one specific question to begin with.

Related pages

[This semester](#)

Who is in the Teaching and Learning Center this term, and when.

[Understanding a writing prompt](#)

Read the prompt closely before your session, and bring your questions.

[Emailing an instructor and asking questions](#)

How to ask for help in writing.

[Help-Seeking as a Strength](#) (<https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/FYE100-pathfinder-guidebook/chapters/ch02/2-3.html>)

A lesson from the FYE 100 Pathfinder Guidebook about asking for help.

Tools and AI

TOOLS AND AI

Translation, Grammar Tools, and AI: Check the Rules First

Use this page when you want to use a dictionary, a translation tool, a grammar checker, or AI on an assignment.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/tools/check-the-rules.html>

Two things to check before you use a tool

You probably use tools for language every day: a translation app, spell check, a dictionary, or an AI chat tool such as Microsoft Copilot. In college, the rules for these tools can change from one assignment to the next. Before you use a tool on an assignment, check two things.

1. The AI use label

At OCTC, each assignment has an **AI use label** at the top of its directions. Your instructor's AI Course Policy in the syllabus has the rules for the whole course. There are three labels:

The three AI use labels

Label	In short	What it means
No AI	Practice on your own.	You do the work without AI. The skill itself is what you are practicing.
AI-supported	You lead. AI supports.	You may use AI for the parts your instructor names. The thinking and the final work are yours.
AI-integrated	Using AI is part of the task.	Using AI well is part of the assignment. Your instructor tells you how.

For more about the labels and the 3 Qs to ask each time you use AI, see [AI Literacy: Start Where You Are](https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/Bb_Start_Here/ai-literacy.html) (https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/Bb_Start_Here/ai-literacy.html).

2. The rules for language tools

The label is about AI. It does not always tell you about a dictionary, spell check, or a translation tool. Look for a separate line in the directions, often called **Tools**. If you cannot find one, ask your instructor.

KEY TERMS

AI use label: the line at the top of an assignment that says how you may use AI on it.

Translation tool: an app or website that changes text from one language to another.

Grammar checker: a tool that marks possible errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

Rewrite: to write a sentence again in different words. Many tools now offer to rewrite your sentences for you.

One question for any tool: who leads?

Some tools give you information, and you decide what to write. Other tools write for you. Ask yourself: **Am I leading, or is the tool leading?**

Language tools and who leads

What you do	Who leads?	What to check
Look up a word in a dictionary	You	The Tools line. A few assignments, such as some vocabulary quizzes, do not allow it.
Use spell check to find errors, then fix them yourself	You	The Tools line.
Translate part of a reading to understand it	You	The Tools line. Many instructors allow this, but ask if the directions do not say.
Listen to a reading with text-to-speech	You	The Tools line. If you use it as an approved accommodation, follow your accommodation.
Translate your own writing into English	The tool	The AI use label and the Tools line. The tool writes the English sentences.
Click “rewrite” or accept a suggested new sentence	The tool	The AI use label. A tool that rewrites your sentences counts as AI, even if it calls itself a grammar or translation tool.
Ask Copilot to explain a grammar rule	You	The AI use label. On a No AI assignment, ask a tutor instead.

WHY IT MATTERS

When a tool rewrites your sentences, it can change your meaning, and the words are no longer yours. Your instructor wants to read your ideas in your words. Small errors in your own sentences are part of learning.

Example: assignment directions with a label and a Tools line

Here is the top of one set of assignment directions. Each number matches a note below.

Assignment directions with notes

AI use: AI-supported. ① You may use Copilot to brainstorm topic ideas and to explain grammar rules. ② Your essay must be written in your own words. ③

Tools: You may use a dictionary, spell check, and a translation tool to understand the readings. ④ Do not use a translation tool or a rewriting tool on your essay. ⑤

① The label.

AI-supported means you lead and AI supports. It does not mean every use of AI is allowed.

② The allowed uses.

The directions name two uses. Other uses, such as asking Copilot to write a paragraph, are not allowed.

③ What stays yours.

The writing itself is your work.

④ The Tools line.

This line answers the questions the label does not: dictionary, spell check, and translation.

⑤ The limit.

Translating a reading to understand it is allowed. Translating your essay is not, because the tool would write the English sentences.

Language focus: saying exactly what you want to use a tool for

LANGUAGE FOCUS

to + verb, or for + noun

A specific question gets a specific answer. When you ask about a tool, say what you want to use it *for*. English has two common patterns for this.

Two ways to say the purpose

Pattern	Example
use [tool] to + base verb	May I use a translation tool to understand the article?
use [tool] for + noun	May I use Copilot for brainstorming ?

Pattern	Example
use [tool] for + noun	Is a dictionary allowed for the vocabulary quiz ?

WATCH FOR THIS

Do not put for and to together. Write **I used a dictionary to check the meaning**. Do not write “I used a dictionary for to check the meaning.”

Compare a general question and a specific one:

- General: **Can I use AI?**
- Specific: **May I use Copilot to explain the grammar comments on my draft if I make the changes myself?**

Sentence starters

Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO ASK ABOUT A TOOL

May I use _____ to _____ for this assignment?

Is it OK to use _____ for _____?

WHEN THE DIRECTIONS DO NOT SAY

Professor _____, the directions for _____ do not mention _____. Would it be OK to use it to _____ if I _____ myself?

TO CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Just to check: I may use _____ for the readings, but not for my writing. Is that right?

Practice

1. Who leads: you or the tool?
 - A. You paste your paragraph into a translation app and copy the English version.
 - B. You look up the word “hypothesis” in a dictionary.
 - C. A grammar tool offers a new version of your sentence, and you click “Accept.”
2. An assignment says **“AI use: No AI.”** It has no Tools line. You want to use a dictionary. What should you do?
3. Make this question more specific: **“Can I use translation?”**
4. Correct this sentence: **“I used Copilot for to explain the rule.”**

Suggested answers

1. A: the tool. B: you. C: the tool.

In A and C, the tool writes the sentences. In B, the dictionary gives you information, and you decide what to write.

2. Ask your instructor.

The label is about AI. It does not say whether a dictionary is allowed. A short question before you start is easy to answer.

3. One possible answer: “May I use a translation tool to understand the second reading?”

It names the tool, the purpose, and the part of the work. Other answers are possible.

4. I used Copilot to explain the rule.

Use to + base verb, or for + noun, but not both: I used Copilot for an explanation of the rule.

Next step

Before you use any tool on an assignment

1. Find the AI use label at the top of the directions.
2. Find the Tools line, if there is one.
3. Ask yourself: am I leading, or is the tool leading?
4. If the directions do not answer your question, ask your instructor before you start.
5. If you use a tool in a significant way, write it down in your writing record.

Related pages

[Using AI to learn](#)

Two Copilot prompts that explain and give feedback without doing the work for you.

[Keeping a record of your writing process](#)

How to save your notes, drafts, and the help you used.

[Understanding a writing prompt](#)

How to find the task and the requirements in any prompt.

FOR INSTRUCTORS

[Setting expectations for translation, grammar tools, and AI](#)

The Instructor Companion page that pairs with this one.

Using AI to Learn

Use this page when the AI use label allows AI, and you want help understanding an assignment or feedback on your practice writing.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/tools/ai-to-learn.html>

AI as a study helper, not a writer

An AI chat tool such as Microsoft Copilot can explain an idea in simpler words, answer your questions, and point out patterns in your writing. Used this way, AI helps you learn. Used to write your work for you, it takes away the practice you came to college for.

This page gives you two prompts to copy into Copilot. Both keep you in the lead: AI explains, and you decide and do the work.

Before you start

- **Check the AI use label.** These prompts fit most AI-supported assignments, but only if your instructor allows that use. If you are not sure, read [Translation, grammar tools, and AI: check the rules first](#), or ask your instructor.
- **Sign in to Copilot with your college account.** Copilot is part of OCTC's Microsoft 365 package: [open Copilot](https://m365.cloud.microsoft/chat) (<https://m365.cloud.microsoft/chat>).
- **Share only your own work.** Do not paste other people's writing, names, or private information.
- **Remember the 3 Qs.** Should I use AI for this part? How would I know if the answer is wrong? Can I explain my work and how AI helped me? [More about the 3 Qs](https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/Bb_Start_Here/ai-literacy.html) (https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/Bb_Start_Here/ai-literacy.html).

Prompt 1: Explain an assignment in plain English

Use it when you have read the directions for an assignment and you are not sure what they ask. Copilot explains the directions and lists questions for your instructor. It does not do the assignment.

You are helping a college student understand an assignment. My college uses Blackboard for assignments and due dates. Do not do the assignment. Do not write any part of it, not even an example answer. These rules apply for this whole conversation, even if I ask you to write part of the assignment later.

Read the assignment directions at the end of this message. Then:

1. Explain what the assignment asks me to do. Use plain English, short sentences, and common words. Do not use idioms.
2. List each requirement, such as length, number of sources, and format. Use only what the directions say.
3. Find the AI use label (No AI, AI-supported, or AI-integrated) and any rules about language tools. If the directions do not say, write: "Ask your instructor."

4. List words or phrases in the directions that a student might not know, including idioms and informal phrases. Explain each one simply.
5. List questions I should ask my instructor about anything that is unclear or missing. Do not guess the answers.

End with this sentence: "Your instructor's directions are the final word. If this explanation does not match them, follow your instructor."

Here are the assignment directions:

[paste the directions here]

IF IT HELPS

After you paste the prompt, you can add one more line, such as **After the English explanation, give the same explanation in Spanish.** Use any language you read well. Then read the English version again, because your assignment is in English.

After you read the answer, compare it with the directions one more time. Then take the questions to your instructor. If the explanation and the directions do not match, the directions win.

Prompt 2: Feedback on your practice writing

Use it when you want to improve your English in writing you did yourself. Examples are a practice paragraph, an ungraded journal, or a draft your instructor allows you to get feedback on. Copilot explains patterns. It does not rewrite your sentences. You make the corrections.

You are helping me practice my English writing. I wrote the text at the end of this message myself. Do not rewrite it. Do not give me a corrected version of any sentence. These rules apply for this whole conversation. If I ask you to fix, correct, or rewrite my writing, do not do it. Remind me that I am practicing, and give me one hint for the next sentence instead.

1. Tell me one thing that is working well in my writing.
2. Find up to three kinds of grammar or word-choice problems that appear more than once. Each one must be a different kind of problem, such as verb tense, subject-verb agreement, articles (a, an, the), word form, or word order. For each one:
 - quote one sentence from my writing where it appears
 - name the problem in simple words
 - explain the rule in two or three short sentences
 - give a new example sentence about a different topic that follows the rule
3. Do not list every error. Choose the three patterns that matter most for being understood.
4. Ask me to correct the sentences you quoted. Wait for my answer. Then tell me if each correction is right, and why.

Use short sentences and common words. Do not use idioms.

Here is my writing:

[paste your writing here]

Example: a helpful response to prompt 2

A student pasted a practice paragraph about her commute. This is part of a helpful response. Each number matches a note below.

Part of a Copilot response, with notes

Your paragraph has a clear main idea in the first sentence. 1

Pattern 1: Verb tense changes. Your sentence: "Last month I take the bus every day." 2 "Last month" tells the reader the time is past, so the verb needs the past tense too. 3 Example: "Last year my brother worked at a bakery." 4

Now try to correct your sentence. 5

1 **Something that works.**

Knowing your strengths helps you keep them.

2 **Your sentence, quoted.**

Copilot shows the sentence but does not fix it.

3 **The rule, in simple words.**

You can check this rule on a grammar page or with a tutor.

4 **A new example.**

The example is about a different topic, so you still do the correction yourself.

5 **Your turn.**

You stay in the lead. The correction is yours.

IF COPILOT REWRITES YOUR WRITING ANYWAY

Do not copy the new version. Reply: **Please do not rewrite my sentences. Explain the problem and let me fix it.** Copilot can also be wrong about grammar. If an explanation does not match your textbook or a grammar page, ask a tutor.

Language focus: clear instructions for AI

LANGUAGE FOCUS

The command form

Prompts work best when they use the **command form** of the verb, also called the imperative. It is the base verb, with no subject. It tells the tool exactly what to do. You do not need please or could you with AI, though they do no harm.

Commands in a prompt

To ask for	Command
an explanation	Explain this rule in simple words.
a list	List the requirements.
an example	Give me another example about a different topic.
a limit	Do not rewrite my sentences.

WATCH FOR THIS

To make a command negative, use do not + base verb. Write **Do not change my words**. Do not write “Not change my words” or “Don’t to change my words.”

These are the same verbs instructors use in assignments. For more, see [Task verbs: analyze, compare, evaluate](#).

Follow-up prompts

After the first answer, you can ask more. Fill in each blank with your own words.

WHEN THE ANSWER IS HARD TO UNDERSTAND

Explain _____ in simpler words.

What does _____ mean?

WHEN YOU WANT MORE PRACTICE

Give me three practice sentences with _____. Do not give the answers until I try.

WHEN YOU WANT TO CHECK A CORRECTION

I changed my sentence to: _____. Is it correct? Explain why.

WHEN YOU WANT TO STAY IN THE LEAD

Do not rewrite my sentence. Tell me what is wrong with _____.

Practice

1. Which follow-up keeps you in the lead?
 - A. Fix all my errors.
 - B. Write a better version of my paragraph.
 - C. Explain why this sentence is wrong. Let me fix it.
2. You used prompt 1. Copilot says the essay must be 800 words, but the directions say 600 words. Which number do you follow?
3. Correct this prompt: **“Not give me the answers.”**
4. Your assignment is labeled No AI. You want feedback on your grammar. What can you do?

Suggested answers

1. **C.**
Copilot explains, and you make the change. In A and B, the tool writes the sentences.
2. **600 words.**
The directions are the final word. AI can make mistakes when it reads directions. You can also ask your instructor.
3. **Do not give me the answers.**
A negative command uses do not + base verb.
4. **Go to a tutor, or ask your instructor.**
No AI means the skill itself is what you are practicing. A tutor can give feedback in a way the assignment allows.

Next step

After you use AI on an assignment

1. Check the answer against the directions or your course materials.
2. Make sure you can explain your work without the AI response in front of you.
3. Write a short note in your writing record: what you asked, what you used, and what you did yourself.
4. Follow your instructor’s directions for telling them how you used AI.

Related pages

[Translation, grammar tools, and AI: check the rules first](#)

How to tell which tools an assignment allows.

[Keeping a record of your writing process](#)

How to write down how you used AI and other help.

[Working with a tutor](#)

Help from a person, for any assignment.

FOR INSTRUCTORS

[Setting expectations for translation, grammar tools, and AI](#)

The Instructor Companion page that pairs with this one.

Keeping a Record of Your Writing Process

Use this page when you start a writing assignment, or you want to show how your work developed.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/tools/writing-record.html>

What a writing record is

A **writing record** is a collection of the work you do on the way to a finished assignment. It shows how your work grew. Some OCTC pages call it a **trail**.

Every student can keep one. It helps you in three ways:

- **You can see your own learning.** Comparing an early draft with a final draft shows you what you can now do.
- **You can talk about your process.** If your instructor or a tutor asks how you did an assignment, you can show them.
- **You can tell your instructor how you used help.** Your notes make it easy to write an accurate AI use note.

WHAT A RECORD CAN AND CANNOT DO

A writing record shows how your work developed, and it helps you and your instructor talk about it. It does not prove that you used AI, and it does not prove that you did not. No tool or record can do that. The record is a starting point for a conversation.

KEY TERMS

Draft: an early version of a piece of writing.

Version history: a list of saved versions of a document, with dates. Word and Google Docs keep one for you.

Source notes: notes on what you read, with where you found it.

Significant help: help that changed your work in an important way, such as a tutor's advice or an AI explanation you used.

What to keep

Parts of a writing record

What to keep	How
Brainstorming	Lists, notes, or a photo of handwritten ideas.
Outline	Save it as its own document or page.
Drafts	Write in one Word document saved to OneDrive. Word keeps a dated version history.

What to keep	How
Source notes	What you read, where you found it, and the ideas you want to use.
Notes on significant help	A few sentences each time a tutor, AI, or a translation tool helped in an important way.

For step-by-step setup with Word, OneDrive, and OneNote, see [Keep a trail of your work](https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/Bb_Start_Here/ai-keep-a-trail.html) (https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/Bb_Start_Here/ai-keep-a-trail.html). All three are free with your college account.

What counts as significant help?

You do not need to write down every word you look up. Write a note when help changed your work in an important way. For example:

- A tutor helped you reorganize your paragraphs.
- You used Copilot to explain a reading or a grammar rule.
- You translated a whole section of an article to understand it.

TYPE IN THE DOCUMENT

Write your draft in the document. If you write somewhere else and paste finished text in at the end, the version history cannot show how your work grew.

Example: a note on significant help

A student kept this note in her OneNote section for an essay. Each number matches a note below.

A help note with notes

Essay 2. Label: AI-supported. Copilot may explain readings and grammar. 1

I translated the second section of the article to understand the main argument. 2 I asked Copilot to explain when to use “the” with plural nouns. 3 I fixed the articles in my second paragraph myself. 4 On Thursday, a tutor showed me that my third paragraph repeated my first one. I cut it and wrote a new paragraph about cost. 5

1 The assignment and the label.

The note starts with the rules, so the student can check that her help fits them.

2 Translation help.

She says what she translated and why. She does not list every word she looked up.

3 AI help.

She names the tool and the question.

4 What she did herself.

This sentence shows who made the change.

5 Help from a person.

Tutor help is part of the record too. The change is specific: what she cut and what she wrote.

Language focus: saying who did what

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Active sentences with a clear subject

In a writing record, the most important information is **who did each thing**: you, a tutor, or a tool. Put that person or tool first, as the subject. Then use a past-tense verb.

Unclear and clear

Unclear: who did it?	Clear
The topic was chosen.	I chose the topic.
Some ideas were suggested.	Copilot suggested five ideas. I used one.
The paragraph was reorganized.	The tutor showed me a problem. I reorganized the paragraph.

WATCH FOR THIS

Sentences such as “The topic was chosen” are called **passive**. They are correct English, but they hide the person who did the action. In a record, name the person or the tool.

Common past-tense verbs for a record: **asked, used, translated, chose, changed, cut, added, checked, wrote**.

Sentence starters

Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO RECORD AI HELP

I asked _____ to _____. I used _____.

TO RECORD TRANSLATION HELP

I translated _____ to understand _____.

TO RECORD TUTOR HELP

A tutor showed me _____. I changed _____.

TO SAY WHAT YOU DID YOURSELF

I _____ myself.

I chose _____ and wrote _____

Practice

1. Which note is more useful?
 - A. I used AI some.
 - B. I asked Copilot to explain the difference between “affect” and “effect.” I fixed my sentences myself.
2. Rewrite with a clear subject: **“The introduction was rewritten.”**
3. You looked up four words in a dictionary while you wrote. Do you need a note for each word?
4. True or false: If you keep a writing record, it proves that you did not use AI.

Suggested answers

1. B.

It names the tool, the question, and what the student did. A does not say what AI did.

2. One possible answer: “I rewrote the introduction.”

The subject shows who did it. If a tutor or a tool helped, name them too: “A tutor suggested a new first sentence, and I rewrote the introduction.”

3. No.

A note is for significant help. Looking up a few words is a normal part of writing. Check that dictionaries are allowed.

4. False.

A record shows how your work grew. It cannot prove or disprove AI use. It helps you talk about your process.

Next step

Start your record with your next assignment

1. Make one Word document for the assignment, saved to OneDrive, before you start writing.
2. Make one place for notes: a OneNote section or a separate document.
3. Write a short note each time you get significant help.
4. Before you submit, read your notes and write your AI use note if your instructor asks for one.

Related pages

[Translation, grammar tools, and AI: check the rules first](#)

How to tell which tools an assignment allows.

[Using AI to learn](#)

Two Copilot prompts that keep you in the lead.

[Writing a journal or reflection](#)

How to write about your own learning.

FOR INSTRUCTORS

[Setting expectations for translation, grammar tools, and AI](#)

The Instructor Companion page that pairs with this one.

College Life

COLLEGE LIFE

Feeling at Home in College

Use this page when you wonder whether you belong in college, or everything still feels new.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/life/feeling-at-home.html>

What many students notice

In the first weeks of college, many students wonder if they belong. Everyone else seems to know where to go, what to say, and how things work. You may be the first in your family to go to college, the oldest person in the room, the youngest, or new to the area. You may be studying in a language that is not your first.

That feeling is very common, and it usually changes with time. It is not a sign that you made a mistake by coming to college.

- **Other students feel it too.** Most of them do not say so, which is why it can feel like you are the only one.
- **Not knowing is normal.** Every college has its own words, places, and habits. Everyone learns them the same way: by asking and by doing.
- **You bring experience.** Work, family, other languages, and other schools are strengths in a college classroom.

What helps

- 1 **Find a home base.** Choose one place on campus or online where you can study and feel comfortable, such as the library or the Teaching and Learning Center.
- 2 **Learn the place.** Walk the campus once. Find your classrooms, the library, and where to get help, before you need them.
- 3 **Learn a few names.** One classmate and one instructor who know your name make a large campus feel smaller. See [Making connections](#).
- 4 **Ask one question.** Every question you ask makes the next one easier. Instructors and staff answer the same questions every term.
- 5 **Notice your progress.** At the end of each week, name one thing that is easier than it was. Small changes add up.

Example: a student looks back

A student wrote this short reflection in her fourth week. Each number matches a note below.

A reflection, with notes

On the first day, I sat in my car for ten minutes before I went inside. **1** I thought everyone would know more than me. **2** In the second week, I asked the student next to me about the homework, and she was confused too. **3** Now I am getting used to the schedule, and I study in the library before my evening class. **4** I still feel nervous sometimes, but less than before. **5**

- 1 A common first day.**
Many students feel this way, even if nobody can see it.
- 2 The worry.**
It feels true at the time. It is often not true.
- 3 One small step.**
A question to a classmate showed her that she was not the only one.
- 4 A routine and a home base.**
The library became her place before class.
- 5 Honest progress.**
The feeling did not disappear. It got smaller. That is normal.

Language focus: used to and getting used to

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Three phrases that look alike

English has three phrases with *used to*. They mean different things, and all three are useful for talking about change.

Three phrases with *used to*

Phrase	Meaning	Example
used to + base verb	something true in the past, not now	I used to work nights.
be used to + noun or -ing	familiar and comfortable now	I am used to the campus now.
get used to + noun or -ing	becoming familiar over time	I am getting used to studying in English.

WATCH FOR THIS

After be used to and get used to, use a noun or an -ing verb, not the base verb. Write **I am getting used to speaking in class**. Do not write "I am getting used to speak in class."

Sentence starters

Use these to notice your own progress. Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO COMPARE THEN AND NOW

At first, I _____, but now I _____.

I used to _____.

TO NAME WHAT IS CHANGING

I am getting used to _____.

Something that is easier now is _____.

TO ASK FOR HELP

I am new here. Could you tell me where _____ is?

Where to start at OCTC

- **The library.** A quiet place to study, with help finding sources. [OCTC Library](https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/current-students/student-resources/library/index.aspx)
(<https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/current-students/student-resources/library/index.aspx>)
- **The Teaching and Learning Center (TLC).** Free tutoring and writing help. See [This semester](#) for hours.
- **Campus events.** The [OCTC events calendar](https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/about/events.aspx) (<https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/about/events.aspx>) lists what is happening on campus.
- **Student support.** Advising, counseling, and help with everyday needs. See [OCTC Student Support](https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/Bb_Start_Here/student-support.html)
(https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/Bb_Start_Here/student-support.html).

IF THE FEELING DOES NOT GET SMALLER

If you feel alone or overwhelmed for a long time, talk to someone: an advisor, an instructor you trust, or a counselor. Asking for support is a normal part of college. OCTC Student Support lists where to start.

Next step

Try one thing this week

1. Choose your home base on campus or online.

2. Ask one question you have been waiting to ask.
3. At the end of the week, finish this sentence: “Something that is easier now is ...”

Related pages

[Making connections](#)

Classmates, study partners, instructors, and events.

[College terms you will hear in your first weeks](#)

The words that make college feel less new.

[Interacting in class: common expectations](#)

What instructors and classmates usually expect.

Balancing School, Work, and Family

Use this page when your classes, job, and family all need your time, and you want a plan.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/life/balancing-school-work-family.html>

What many students notice

Most community college students do more than go to school. Many work, care for children or parents, or both. A college schedule is built around classes, but your life is built around everything else too. Feeling that you have too much to do is common. It is not a sign that you do not belong in college.

- **College work happens outside class.** Many colleges plan for about two hours of study each week for every [credit hour](#). Check your syllabus for what your instructor expects.
- **Problems are easier to solve early.** A schedule change at work is a small problem on Monday and a big one on the night an assignment is due.
- **Instructors expect life to happen.** Many will work with a student who tells them about a problem before a deadline.

What helps

- 1 **Put every due date in one place.** At the start of the term, copy all due dates from each syllabus into one calendar, on paper or on your phone.
- 2 **Plan your week, not just your day.** On one day each week, look at the week ahead. Find the time you have for each class, and write it down.
- 3 **Use small pieces of time.** Thirty minutes on a break can be enough to read a few pages or review notes.
- 4 **Tell people what you need.** Tell your family when you need quiet time. Ask your manager about your schedule before the term starts.
- 5 **Contact your instructor early.** If you see a problem coming, write before the due date, not after. See the example below.

TOOLS FOR PLANNING YOUR WEEK

The OCTC Pathfinder Guidebook has two free planning tools: [Where My Time Goes](https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/FYE100-pathfinder-guidebook/chapters/ch03/where-my-time-goes.html)

(<https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/FYE100-pathfinder-guidebook/chapters/ch03/where-my-time-goes.html>) and [My Week at a Glance](https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/FYE100-pathfinder-guidebook/chapters/ch03/my-week-at-a-glance.html) (<https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/FYE100-pathfinder-guidebook/chapters/ch03/my-week-at-a-glance.html>). Its [module on time and energy](https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/FYE100-pathfinder-guidebook/chapters/ch03/index.html) (<https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/FYE100-pathfinder-guidebook/chapters/ch03/index.html>) goes further.

Example: asking for flexibility before a deadline

A student's work schedule changed. She writes to her instructor three days before the due date. Each number matches a note below.

An email with notes

Subject: BIO 135: Lab report due Friday

Dear Professor Grant,

My manager changed my schedule this week, and I will work double shifts on Thursday and Friday. **1** I have finished the data section of my lab report, but I will not have time to finish the discussion by Friday at 11:59 p.m. **2** Would it be possible to submit it by Sunday at noon? **3** If that is not possible, I understand, and I will submit what I have on Friday. **4**

Thank you,
Rosa Delgado

1 A short reason.

One sentence is enough. You do not need to share private details.

2 What is done, and what is not.

This shows that the student has been working.

3 A specific request.

She names a new day and time. **Would it be possible to** is a polite way to ask.

4 A backup plan.

She accepts that the answer may be no, and says what she will do.

Check your syllabus first. Some courses have a late-work policy or a set number of extensions. If the policy answers your question, follow it.

Language focus: deadline words

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Small words with big meaning

Due dates use short words that change the meaning. Read them carefully.

Words used with deadlines

Word	Meaning	Example
by	at that time or earlier	Submit the essay by Friday at 11:59 p.m.
until	continuing up to that time	The quiz is open until Sunday.
before	earlier than that time	Read Chapter 3 before class.
on / at / in	a day / a clock time / a month or part of the day	on Monday, at 3 p.m., in March, in the morning
within	no later than the end of that time	I reply to email within two days.

WATCH FOR THIS

Due by Friday means Friday is the last day. You may submit it earlier. Check the time too: 11:59 p.m. is one minute before midnight, still on Friday.

Sentence starters

Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO ASK FOR FLEXIBILITY

Would it be possible to submit _____ by _____?

TO EXPLAIN BRIEFLY

My _____ schedule changed this week.

I have a family responsibility on _____.

TO SHOW YOUR PROGRESS

I have finished _____, but I still need to _____.

TO TALK TO YOUR MANAGER

I have class on _____ at _____. Could I work a different shift that day?

Where to start at OCTC

- **Your syllabus.** It has due dates, the late-work policy, and how to contact your instructor.
- **Your advisor.** If your schedule is too full, an advisor can help you plan which courses to take and when.
- **Student support.** OCTC offers help with advising, counseling, and everyday needs. See [OCTC Student Support](https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/Bb_Start_Here/student-support.html) (https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/Bb_Start_Here/student-support.html).

Next step

Try one thing this week

1. Put every due date for the term in one calendar.
2. Choose one day each week to plan the week ahead.
3. If you see a conflict coming, write to your instructor before the due date.

Related pages

[Emailing an instructor and asking questions](#)

The six parts of a clear email.

[College terms you will hear in your first weeks](#)

Words such as late work, drop, and withdraw.

[Making connections](#)

A study partner can help you stay on schedule.

Making Connections

Use this page when you want to get to know classmates, find a study partner, feel more comfortable with your instructors, or find events to attend.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/life/making-connections.html>

What many students notice

At a community college, many students come to class, leave for work or family, and never talk to anyone. That is common, and it is understandable. But students who know even one or two classmates often find college easier. They have someone to ask about an assignment, someone to study with, and someone who notices when they are missing.

Making a connection does not need to be big. It can start with one question before class.

- **Most students want to connect, too.** Many are waiting for someone else to speak first.
- **Short conversations count.** Two minutes before class is a real connection.
- **Online classes have classmates, too.** Discussion boards and messages are places to connect.

Four ways to connect

- 1 **A classmate.** Learn one person's name in each class. Exchange contact information, so you can ask about a missed class or a confusing assignment.
- 2 **A study partner or group.** Two or three people who meet to review notes, quiz each other, or work through a hard reading. Meeting online counts.
- 3 **Your instructors.** Go to office hours once early in the term, even with a small question. An instructor who knows your name can help you more, and can later write a reference for a job or a program.
- 4 **Campus and community events.** Speakers, club meetings, job fairs, performances, and service projects are easy places to meet people, because everyone already has something in common to talk about. Many events are free. Going with a classmate makes it easier the first time.

Where to find events

- **The OCTC events calendar.** [OCTC Events](https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/about/events.aspx) (<https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/about/events.aspx>) lists what is happening on campus.
- **Blackboard announcements and your college email.** Campus events are often announced there too.
- **Flyers and screens on campus.** Look in hallways, the library, and student areas.
- **Your instructors.** Some instructors share events connected to the course, and a few give credit for attending.

- **Your community.** Public libraries, community centers, and local festivals hold free events. Many welcome newcomers and families.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

You do not have to share personal information to connect. Talking about the class, the reading, or the event you are at is enough. Share only what you are comfortable sharing.

Example: starting a conversation

Two students are waiting for class to start. Each number matches a note below.

A short conversation, with notes

Student 1: Hi, I'm Lin. Did you finish the reading for today? ①

Student 2: Hi, I'm Marcus. Most of it. The second part was hard.

Student 1: I thought so, too. ② Would you like to study together before the quiz? ③

Student 2: Sure. I'm free Wednesday afternoon.

Student 1: Great. Can I get your email, or should we use Blackboard messages? ④

① **A name and a class question.**

The question is about something you share, so it is easy to answer.

② **Agreeing.**

A short agreement shows you were listening.

③ **An invitation.**

Would you like to is polite and easy to say yes or no to.

④ **A way to stay in touch.**

Offering a choice lets the other person pick what is comfortable.

Language focus: invitations and replies

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Inviting someone, and answering

An invitation in English is usually a question. A polite reply, yes or no, is short and friendly.

Invitations and replies

To invite	To say yes	To say no politely
Would you like to study together?	Sure, that would help.	Thanks, but I can't this week.
Do you want to meet before the test?	Yes, when are you free?	I'd like to, but I work every evening.
Let's compare our notes after class.	Good idea.	Maybe another time?

WATCH FOR THIS

After **Would you like**, use **to + base verb**: **Would you like to study?** After **Let's**, use the base verb with **no to**: **Let's study.**

A “no” with a reason, such as work, is not rude in a U.S. college. It is normal. You can suggest another time if you want to.

Sentence starters

Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO START A CONVERSATION

Hi, I'm _____. Are you in _____ too?

What did you think of _____?

AT AN EVENT

Is this your first time at _____?

What brought you to _____?

TO ASK ABOUT A MISSED CLASS

I missed class on _____. Could I see your notes?

TO INVITE IN A DISCUSSION BOARD

Is anyone interested in studying for _____ together online?

Where to start at OCTC

- **Your instructor's office hours.** Find them in the syllabus. See [Interacting in class](#) for what to expect.
- **The Teaching and Learning Center (TLC).** Free tutoring and writing help. See [This semester](#) for hours.
- **Campus events.** Check the [OCTC events calendar](https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/about/events.aspx) (<https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/about/events.aspx>), Blackboard announcements, and your college email.

- **Student organizations.** OCTC has clubs connected to programs, interests, and service. [OCTC Activities & Organizations](https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/about/student-life/activities-organizations.aspx)
(<https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/about/student-life/activities-organizations.aspx>)

Next step

Try one thing this week

1. Learn the name of one classmate in each class.
2. Exchange contact information with one person.
3. Visit one instructor's office hours, with one question.
4. Go to one campus or community event, alone or with a classmate.

Related pages

[Interacting in class: common expectations](#)

What instructors and classmates usually expect in class.

[Replying to classmates](#)

How to connect with classmates in an online discussion.

[Emailing an instructor and asking questions](#)

How to contact an instructor in writing.

Different Schools, Different Expectations

Use this page when something about college surprises you, or you are not sure what instructors expect.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/life/different-expectations.html>

What many students notice

Every school has its own expectations. If your last school was a high school ten years ago, a technical program, a job training course, or a school in another country, some things about college may surprise you. Many of these expectations are never written down. Students are expected to know them already.

This page names the most common ones, so you do not have to guess. None of them is the only right way to learn. They are simply how many U.S. college classes work.

Seven common differences

Expectations that may be new

Topic	In some schools	In many U.S. college classes
Learning outside class	Most learning happens in class.	Much of the learning happens outside class. You read before class, and class time is for discussion and practice. See Balancing school, work, and family .
Speaking in class	Students listen, and the teacher talks.	Students are expected to ask questions and share ideas. Participation is often part of the grade.
Disagreeing	Disagreeing with a teacher or a text can seem rude.	Disagreeing politely, with a reason, is welcome. It shows thinking. See Replying to classmates .
Your own ideas	A good answer repeats what the book or the teacher said.	A good answer explains the source and then adds your own analysis or opinion. See Task verbs .
Using sources	Using an expert's words shows respect for the expert.	You must say where every idea and every quotation comes from. Using words or ideas without credit is plagiarism. See Quote, paraphrase, or summarize .
Working together	Helping a classmate with an assignment is always good.	It depends on the assignment. Some work is meant to be done together. Other work must be done alone. Check the directions, or ask.
Grades and deadlines	One big exam decides the grade, and dates are flexible.	Many small assignments add up to the grade, and due dates are usually firm. The syllabus explains the rules.

One more: you are expected to ask

In many U.S. colleges, nobody will check whether you understand. Instructors expect you to ask when you do not. The same is true for support: tutoring, counseling, and accommodations are available, but students must request them. Asking is not a weakness. It is part of the job of being a student.

Example: expectations in a syllabus

Here is part of a syllabus. The highlighted words tell you how strong each expectation is. Each number matches a note below.

Part of a syllabus, with notes

Students **are expected to** ① complete the reading before each class. You **are responsible for** ② checking Blackboard announcements twice a week. You **are encouraged to** ③ form a study group. All essays **must** ④ be your own work. You **may** ⑤ discuss ideas with classmates, but you **may not** ⑥ share your writing.

① **Expected.**

A real requirement. Your instructor will plan class as if you did it.

② **Responsible for.**

If you miss it, it is your problem to fix. "I did not see the announcement" usually is not accepted as a reason.

③ **Encouraged.**

A strong suggestion. It is not required, and it usually helps.

④ **Must.**

A rule. Breaking it can have serious consequences.

⑤ **May.**

Allowed. You choose.

⑥ **May not.**

Not allowed. It does not mean "maybe not."

Language focus: how strong is the rule?

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Expectation words, from strongest to weakest

Expectation words in a syllabus

Words	Strength	What it means for you
must, are required to, may not	A rule	Do it (or do not do it). There are consequences.
are expected to, are responsible for	A firm expectation	Treat it as required, even if it does not say “must.”
should	Strong advice	Usually do it. In some syllabi, it means a requirement. Ask if you are not sure.
are encouraged to, it is a good idea to	A suggestion	Not required, and usually helpful.
may, are welcome to	Permission	You choose.

WATCH FOR THIS

After are expected to and are encouraged to, use the base verb: **You are expected to attend.** After are responsible for, use a noun or an -ing verb: **You are responsible for checking your email.**

Questions you can ask

When an expectation is not clear, ask. Fill in each blank with your own words.

ABOUT WORKING TOGETHER

For _____, is it OK to work with a classmate, or should it be done alone?

ABOUT PARTICIPATION

How is participation graded in this class?

ABOUT YOUR OWN IDEAS

For this assignment, should I include my own opinion, or only explain the reading?

ABOUT A WORD IN THE SYLLABUS

The syllabus says students should _____. Is that required?

Where to start

- **Your syllabus.** Read it in the first week, and look for the expectation words on this page.
- **Your instructor.** Office hours are a good time to ask about expectations. See [Emailing an instructor](#).
- **The Teaching and Learning Center (TLC).** Tutors know how college assignments work. See [This semester](#) for hours.

Next step

Try this with one syllabus

1. Find three expectation words, such as must, expected, or encouraged.
2. For each one, decide: rule, firm expectation, suggestion, or permission?
3. Find the rule about working with classmates. If there is none, ask.

Related pages

[Interacting in class: common expectations](#)

Talking with instructors, speaking in class, and group work.

[College terms you will hear in your first weeks](#)

Words such as syllabus, prerequisite, and academic integrity.

[Understanding a writing prompt](#)

Must, should, and may in assignment directions.

Speaking Up and Being Understood

Use this page when you feel nervous about speaking in class, or people sometimes do not understand you.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/life/speaking-up.html>

What many students notice

Many students feel nervous about speaking in class. Some worry about their accent. Some worry about saying something wrong in front of others. Some wait so long for the perfect sentence that the class moves on.

- **Everyone has an accent.** People from Kentucky, Boston, London, and Lagos all have accents. An accent shows where you learned English, not how well you think.
- **The goal is to be understood.** You do not need to sound like anyone else. Clear speech with an accent is clear speech.
- **Misunderstandings are normal.** People who grew up speaking English misunderstand each other every day. They fix it by asking and explaining. You can do the same.

What helps people understand you

Small changes make the biggest difference. Most of them are about speed and emphasis, not individual sounds.

- 1 **Slow down a little.** Nervous speakers often speak fast. A slightly slower pace gives listeners time.
- 2 **Pause between ideas.** A short pause after each idea helps listeners follow you, the way a period helps readers.
- 3 **Stress the important word.** Say the key word in each idea a little louder and longer: **The DEADLINE is Friday.**
- 4 **Use the key terms from the course.** If the class says photosynthesis, use that word. Listeners recognize it.
- 5 **Show or write it.** In class, point to the slide or the page. Online, type a key word or a number in the chat.

Example: when a listener does not understand

A student answers a question in class. The instructor does not understand one word. Each number matches a note below.

A short exchange, with notes

Student: I think the main cause was the drought.

Instructor: Sorry, the main cause was what?

Student: The drought. 1 When there is no rain for a long time. 2

Instructor: Oh, the drought. Yes, good.

Student: It is on page 42, in the second paragraph. 3

1 Repeat the key word, slowly.

Only the word that was not understood, not the whole sentence.

2 Explain it another way.

A short definition gives the listener a second path to the meaning.

3 Point to the source.

A page number lets everyone see the word in writing.

Notice what the student did not do: apologize for the accent, or stop talking. One quick repair, and the conversation continued.

Language focus: word stress

LANGUAGE FOCUS

The strong syllable

In English words with more than one syllable, one syllable is **stressed**: it is louder, longer, and clearer. Listeners use stress to recognize words. A word with the stress in the wrong place can be hard to understand, even if every sound is correct.

In word families, the stress often moves. Learn the stress with the word.

Stress in word families (the stressed syllable is in capitals)

Word	Related word	Related word
ANalyze	aNALysis	anaLYTical
PHOtograph	phoTOGraphy	photoGRAPHic
eCONomy	ecoNOMic	ecoNOMics
deVELOp	deVELOpment	develOPmental

HOW TO CHECK STRESS

Online dictionaries show stress with a mark (') before the stressed syllable, and most let you listen. Play the word, then say it with the recording.

Two-syllable words that are both a noun and a verb often change stress: a **REcord** (noun), to **reCORD** (verb). A **PREsent**, to **preSENT**.

Sentence starters

Use these to join the conversation, or to repair it. Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO JOIN IN

I'd like to add something about _____.

Can I go back to _____ for a moment?

WHEN YOU ARE NOT UNDERSTOOD

Let me say that another way. _____.

The word is _____. It means _____.

TO BUY A LITTLE TIME

That's a good question. Let me think for a second.

What I mean is _____.

Where to practice

- **Small groups first.** Speaking to two or three classmates is easier than speaking to the whole class. Start there.
- **Office hours.** A one-on-one conversation with an instructor is good practice, and it builds a connection. See [Making connections](#).
- **The Teaching and Learning Center (TLC).** Tutors help with many kinds of coursework. Ask whether a tutor can help you practice a presentation. See [This semester](#) for hours.
- **Recording yourself.** Record one minute on your phone, listen, and try again. It feels strange at first, and it works.

Next step

Try one thing this week

1. Say one thing in each class, even a short question.
2. Find three key words for one course, and check their stress in a dictionary.
3. If someone does not understand you, repeat the key word and explain it another way.

Related pages

[Interacting in class: common expectations](#)

How to ask someone to repeat, and other polite requests.

[Using context clues](#)

Word parts and word families, for reading.

[Making connections](#)

Starting conversations with classmates.

When Things Feel Hard

Use this page when you are stressed, worried, or having a hard week, and you want to know where to get help.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/life/when-things-feel-hard.html>

IF YOU NEED HELP RIGHT NOW

If you are in danger, call **911**. If you are thinking about suicide or are in emotional crisis, call or text **988**, or chat at chat.988lifeline.org (<https://chat.988lifeline.org>). The 988 Lifeline is available 24 hours a day, every day. Text and chat are also available in Spanish, and interpretation is available.

What many students notice

College adds new pressure to a life that is often already full. Deadlines, tests, money, work, family, health, and adjusting to a new place can all arrive at the same time. Feeling stressed, tired, or worried is common, and it does not mean you are failing.

- **Hard weeks happen to everyone.** Many students have at least one during a term.
- **Problems are easier to solve early.** A small problem can grow if nobody knows about it.
- **Asking for help is a skill.** Students who use support services are not weaker. They are using what the college offers.

What helps

- 1 **Name the problem.** Write one sentence: what is hard right now? A problem with a name is easier to solve.
- 2 **Choose one next step.** Not the whole solution. One step, such as one email or one phone call.
- 3 **Tell your instructor early.** You do not need to share details. See the example below.
- 4 **Talk to someone.** A friend, a family member, an advisor, an instructor you trust, or a counselor.
- 5 **Take care of the basics.** Sleep, food, and a short break each day make every other problem easier to handle.

Example: telling an instructor without sharing everything

A student is having a hard week. She writes to her instructor. Each number matches a note below.

An email with notes

Subject: ENG 101: This week's discussion

Dear Professor Morgan,

I am dealing with a family situation this week. ¹ I may not be able to post my discussion reply by Thursday. ²
Could I post it by Sunday instead? ³ I will keep up with the reading. ⁴

Thank you for understanding,
Amina Hassan

1 A general reason.

A **family situation**, a **health issue**, or a **personal situation** is enough. You decide how much to share.

2 What it affects.

The instructor knows exactly which assignment.

3 A specific request.

A new day makes it easy to say yes.

4 What you can still do.

This shows that you are staying connected to the course.

Language focus: saying enough, not everything

LANGUAGE FOCUS

General words for private situations

In a U.S. college, you can ask for help without explaining private details. These general phrases are polite and complete. Many instructors and staff will not ask for more.

General phrases

Instead of explaining	You can say
details about a family member	I am dealing with a family situation.
details about an illness	I have a health issue this week.
details about money or housing	I am dealing with a personal situation.
a long story	Things are difficult right now.

WATCH FOR THIS

Use dealing with + a noun: **I am dealing with a family situation.** Do not write “I am dealing a family situation.”

Some situations, such as a disability, may need documentation for an official accommodation. The Counseling Center can explain that process.

Sentence starters

Fill in each blank with your own words.

TO AN INSTRUCTOR

I am dealing with _____ this week. Could I _____?

TO A COUNSELOR OR ADVISOR

I am having a hard time with _____.

I am not sure where to start. Can you help me with _____?

TO A FRIEND OR CLASSMATE

This week is hard for me. Could you _____?

Where to get help at OCTC

Counseling Center

OCTC counselors help with academic concerns and with personal concerns that affect your progress, such as stress, test anxiety, money, or transportation. Personal counseling is short-term, and counselors can refer you to services in the community for longer support. The Counseling Center also works with students with disabilities on classroom accommodations.

- **Where:** Campus Center, Upper Level, Main Campus
- **Phone:** 270-686-4418
- [OCTC Counseling Center](https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/current-students/counseling-center/index.aspx) (<https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/current-students/counseling-center/index.aspx>)

Basic Needs Hub

Help with food, housing, utilities, emergencies, transportation, health care, and money. OCTC says, “You do not need to be in a crisis to use these services.”

- [OCTC Basic Needs Hub](https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/basicneeds/index.aspx) (<https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/basicneeds/index.aspx>)

More support

- [OCTC Student Support Services](https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/about/student-life/student-support-services.aspx) (<https://owensboro.kctcs.edu/about/student-life/student-support-services.aspx>), including childcare resources, TRIO, and veterans services.
- [OCTC Student Support guide](https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/Bb_Start_Here/student-support.html) (https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/Bb_Start_Here/student-support.html), which lists tutoring, advising, accessibility, counseling, and everyday needs on one page.

Check each service's page for current hours and how to make an appointment. If you study online, ask about options that work for you.

Next step

If this week is hard

1. Write one sentence about what is hard right now.
2. Choose one next step, and do it today.
3. If it affects a class, tell your instructor before the due date.
4. If it is bigger than one step, contact the Counseling Center.

Related pages

[Balancing school, work, and family](#)

Planning your week, and asking for flexibility before a deadline.

[Feeling at home in college](#)

Why many new students feel unsure, and what helps.

[Emailing an instructor and asking questions](#)

The six parts of a clear email.

Instructor Companion

For faculty and staff. Students are welcome to read it too.

INSTRUCTOR COMPANION

Writing a Clear Assignment Prompt

Use this page when you are writing or revising the instructions for a writing assignment.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/instructors/assignment-prompts.html>

What students experience

A prompt is a reading task before it is a writing task. Students who read English as an additional language often read a prompt closely and take its wording literally. That works well when the prompt states its expectations. It works against them when the expectations are implied.

Five features of a prompt cause most of the difficulty:

- **The task is hard to find.** It sits inside background information or a series of questions, and the student cannot tell which questions must be answered.
- **Requirements sound optional.** “You might want to include a few sources” reads as a suggestion.
- **Idioms and cultural references carry the meaning.** “Dig into something that bugs you” depends on phrases a dictionary will not explain.
- **Key terms have no definition.** “Analyze,” “respond critically,” and “polished” mean different things in different courses.
- **The grading criteria are unstated.** Students cannot tell how much weight grammar carries next to ideas and organization.

None of these is a question of ability, and none is limited to multilingual learners. The CCCC statement on multilingual writers puts the principle in one sentence: “Instructors should provide clearly written assignments so that expectations are not left tacit.”

The evidence for stating expectations openly reaches beyond language. In a study at seven minority-serving institutions, two of them community colleges, faculty revised two take-home assignments to state the purpose, the task, and the criteria. Of the 1,800 students invited, 1,174 completed an end-of-term survey. Students who experienced more transparency reported greater academic confidence, a stronger sense of belonging, and greater mastery of the skills employers value. The benefits were larger for first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students (Winkelmes et al., 2016). The study did not examine multilingual learners as a separate group.

Six practices

1

State the purpose

In one or two sentences, say what skill the assignment builds and where students will use it again. Purpose helps students decide what matters most in their response.

2

Put the task first and name it with one verb

Lead with the sentence that says what to produce. Then define the task verb as you use it: “In this course, *analyze* means to explain how the parts of the text work together.”

3

Separate what is required from what is optional

Use *must* for requirements. Put suggestions under their own heading. Students are taught that *should* and *may* signal different levels of obligation, so use them consistently.

4

Put the requirements in a list

List length, sources, format, and submission steps as separate items, each with a number where one applies. Give length in words. A page count changes with font and spacing.

5

Explain or remove idioms and cultural references

Replace idioms with literal wording. Offer topic choices that do not depend on cultural or historical knowledge the course has not taught, as the CCCC statement recommends.

6

Say how the work will be evaluated, including language

Share the rubric with the prompt. State how much sentence-level accuracy counts next to ideas, evidence, and organization. State the AI use label for the assignment, using the label from OCTC's [AI Label Maker](https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/ai-literacy-playbook/ai-label/) (<https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/ai-literacy-playbook/ai-label/>). Then say whether a dictionary, a translation tool, and a grammar checker are allowed, because an AI use label does not answer that.

Before and after

Both versions describe the same assignment. The second is the one students see on the paired student page.

BEFORE

For this next paper I'd like you to dig into something that bugs you. We've all been there: something at work or around town that just doesn't work the way it should. What's going on? Why does it matter? Who's affected? What could be done about it?

You'll probably want to bring in a couple of sources to back yourself up, and it should run about three to four pages. Make sure it's polished!

AFTER

PURPOSE

This essay gives you practice building an argument for a specific reader. You will use this skill in other courses and at work.

TASK

Write an essay that argues for one specific change that would improve a problem at your workplace, in your neighborhood, or at this college. In this course, *argue* means to state a position and support it with reasons and evidence.

READER

Write for the people who could make the change.

REQUIREMENTS

- 750–1,000 words
- Evidence from at least two credible sources
- MLA format
- Submitted in Blackboard by the due date listed there

OPTIONAL

You may write in first person (I, my).

GRADING

See the rubric attached to this assignment.

What changed

- **Four idioms are gone:** “dig into,” “bugs you,” “we’ve all been there,” and “back yourself up.”
- **Four questions became one task.** A student no longer has to guess whether each question needs its own answer.
- **“Probably want to” and “a couple” became “at least two.”** The requirement is now a requirement, with a number.
- **Pages became words.**
- **“Polished” became a rubric.**
- **The reader is named.** The first version never says who the essay is for.

Wording you can copy

Replace the text in brackets.

Purpose. This assignment gives you practice with [skill]. You will use this skill when you [situation].

Task. Write a [type of text] that [task verb] [topic]. In this course, “[task verb]” means [definition].

Requirements. Your [type of text] must: [list, one item per line].

Optional. You may also [choice].

Language. Most of your grade is for [priorities, such as your argument and evidence]. Grammar and word choice count for [amount, or “only where they make your meaning unclear”].

Tools. AI use label: [No AI / AI-supported / AI-integrated]. [If AI-supported: You may use AI for (uses). You may not use AI to (limit).] [If AI-integrated: With AI, you will (steps). On your own, you must (your part). To show how you used AI, turn in (evidence).] You [may / may not] use [a dictionary, a translation tool, a grammar checker] to [purpose]. If you are not sure whether a tool is allowed, ask me before you use it.

Questions. If any part of this prompt is unclear, ask me. Questions about a prompt are welcome.

Check before you post

These are the five questions the student page teaches. A student should be able to answer each one from the prompt alone.

1. What do I do? (One task, named with a defined verb.)
2. What do I write about? (The topic and its limits.)
3. Who is my reader?
4. What are the requirements? (Each one stated as a requirement, with a number.)
5. How do I finish? (Where to find the due date, where to submit, and how the work is graded.)

For a stronger check, ask a colleague outside your discipline to read the prompt and tell you what it asks for.

Link for students

The paired student page teaches the five questions, the difference between *must*, *should*, and *may*, and ways to ask about a prompt. You can add this line to an assignment in Blackboard:

Before you start, read [Understanding a Writing Prompt](#). It shows you how to find the task, the requirements, and the limits in any prompt.

Tool

The [Assignment prompt builder](#) turns these practices into a fill-in form, and it includes a Copilot prompt for checking a prompt you already have.

Sources

- Conference on College Composition and Communication. (2020). [CCCC statement on second language writing and multilingual writers](https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting) (<https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting>). See “Writing Assignment Design” and “Assessment.”
- Winkelmes, M., Bernacki, M., Butler, J., Zochowski, M., Golanics, J., & Weavil, K. H. (2016). A teaching intervention that increases underserved college students’ success. *Peer Review*, 18(1/2), 31–36. A summary handout with example assignments: [Transparent Instruction and Its Impact on Learning \(PDF\)](https://ts3.nashonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Winkelmes-TILT-Handout-accessible.pdf) (<https://ts3.nashonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Winkelmes-TILT-Handout-accessible.pdf>). More on the framework: [Transparency in Learning and Teaching \(TILT Higher Ed\)](https://tilthighered.com/) (<https://tilthighered.com/>).

Setting Expectations for Discussions and Journals

Use this page when you assign discussion posts, journals, or reflections.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/instructors/discussions-journals.html>

What students experience

Discussions and journals depend on unwritten rules more than any other assignment type. An instructor who has read thousands of posts knows what a good one looks like, so a prompt such as “post your thoughts and respond to two classmates” feels complete. To a student, it leaves most of the assignment undefined.

This affects every student. Some skim the instructions and miss a detail that is there. Others read every word and still cannot find the expectation, because it was never written down. Multilingual learners are often in the second group, and they may also be working from classroom conventions learned in a different educational system.

These are the questions students most often cannot answer from the prompt:

DISCUSSIONS

- How formal should my writing be?
- May I write “I”?
- Do I need sources?
- What counts as a reply?
- May I disagree with a classmate? With the reading?
With the instructor?
- Is my grammar graded?

JOURNALS AND REFLECTIONS

- Who will read this?
- How personal should it be?
- May I say that something in the course is not working for me?
- Is it safe to admit that I did not understand?
- Is my grammar graded?

Expectations about disagreement, self-disclosure, and how to address an instructor differ between educational systems. The CCCC statement asks instructors to check their assignments for unstated cultural assumptions, and it notes that topics drawing on personal experience can be sensitive for some students. In every case, the practical response is to state the expectation.

Eight practices

1

Say what the activity is for

One sentence is enough. “This discussion gives you practice explaining an idea from the reading to other people.”

2

Say who will read it

Students write differently for the whole class than for one instructor. For a journal, say plainly whether anyone but you will see it.

3

Describe the style you expect

State whether you want complete sentences, whether “I” is acceptable, and whether sources are needed. “Be professional” and “use netiquette” do not answer these questions.

4

Define a reply

Give a length and say what a reply must do: answer a classmate’s question, add an example, or explain a different view with a reason. Say that “I agree” alone does not count.

5

Say that disagreement is welcome, and show how

A student who was taught not to contradict a classmate or an instructor may need explicit permission. Give them wording: “I see this differently because ...”

6

Say how language is graded

Decide how much sentence-level accuracy counts in low-stakes writing, and state it either way. A student who does not know may assume that every error costs points, and write less.

7

Show an annotated model

One model post with notes shows length, style, and depth faster than a paragraph of description. The transparency framework treats annotated examples as part of the criteria (Winkelmess et al., 2016).

8

Offer an alternative to personal topics

When a prompt asks about family, background, or personal difficulty, give a second option that does not, as the CCCC statement recommends.

A PRACTICE TO TRY

Ask students to end each first post with an open question for classmates. It gives every student who must “reply to two classmates” a place to start. This is practitioner advice. We did not find a study that tests it directly.

Before and after

Both versions describe the same discussion. The second matches the example on the paired student page.

BEFORE

Post your thoughts on this week’s reading and respond to two classmates. Be thoughtful, and remember your netiquette!

AFTER**PURPOSE**

This discussion gives you practice explaining an idea from the reading to other people.

FIRST POST

Answer this question: Which time-management strategy from the reading would be most useful for you, and why? Write 100–150 words. Give one reason and one example. End with a question for your classmates.

REPLIES

Reply to two classmates. Each reply must be at least 50 words. A reply must add something: answer your classmate’s question, give an example, or explain a different view with a reason.

STYLE

Write in complete sentences. You may use “I.” You do not need outside sources.

DISAGREEMENT

You may disagree with a classmate or with the reading. Give a reason, and write about the idea, not the person.

GRADING

See the rubric. Grammar and spelling are not graded in discussions unless they make your meaning unclear.

DUE DATES

What changed

- “Your thoughts” became one question with two parts.
- “Thoughtful” became a length, a reason, and an example.
- “Respond” became a definition of a reply.
- “Netiquette” became two concrete expectations: a style, and a way to disagree.
- The grading of language is stated. The line shown is one possible policy. Use your own.

Wording you can copy

Replace the text in brackets.

For journals and reflections

Reader. [Only I will read your journal. / Your journal is shared with your group.]

What to share. You choose what to share. You never have to write about private matters. If a prompt asks about personal experience and you prefer not to answer, you may write about [alternative topic].

Honesty. You may write about what is difficult or not working for you in this course. Honest answers will not lower your grade.

Language. I read your journal for your ideas. [Grammar and spelling are not graded. / Grammar and spelling count for (amount).]

For discussions, in place of “netiquette”

In our discussions:

- Begin a reply with your classmate’s name.
- Write in complete sentences. Do not write in all capital letters.
- You may disagree. Give a reason, and write about the idea, not the person.
- Jokes and sarcasm are easy to misread in writing. Use them with care.
- If a post confuses or upsets you, ask the writer a question before you respond, or contact me.

Links for students

Three student pages pair with this one. The first teaches the four parts of a first post and how to form an open question. The second teaches four kinds of reply and how to disagree politely. The third teaches a three-part reflection and how to

move between past, present, and future. You can add these lines to a discussion or journal in Blackboard:

Before you post, read [Writing a Discussion Post](#). It shows you what a strong first post includes.

Before you reply, read [Replying to Classmates](#). It shows you how to add to a conversation and how to disagree politely.

Before you write your journal, read [Writing a Journal or Reflection](#). It shows you what a strong reflection includes and what you never have to share.

To draft or check a prompt of your own, use the [Assignment prompt builder](#).

Sources

- Conference on College Composition and Communication. (2020). [CCCC statement on second language writing and multilingual writers](https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting) (<https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting>). See “Writing Assignment Design” and Part Four, “Guidelines for Teacher Preparation.”
- Winkelmes, M., Bernacki, M., Butler, J., Zochowski, M., Golanics, J., & Weavil, K. H. (2016). A teaching intervention that increases underserved college students’ success. *Peer Review*, 18(1/2), 31–36.

Assignment Prompt Builder

Use this page when you want to draft a new assignment prompt or check one you already have.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/instructors/prompt-builder.html>

Build a prompt

Fill in what you know, then choose **Build prompt**. The tool assembles your answers under clear headings and lists anything a student could not tell from the prompt. Copy the result into Blackboard and edit it there.

The fill-in builder works on the website. Open this page online to use it: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/instructors/prompt-builder.html>

Check a prompt with Copilot

If you already have a prompt, Microsoft Copilot can read it the way a careful student would and show you what is missing. Copilot is part of the college's Microsoft 365 package. Copy the text below into Copilot, then paste your own prompt at the end.

You are helping a college instructor revise an assignment prompt so that every student can understand it, including students who read English as an additional language. Students at this college submit their work in Blackboard. Do not change what the assignment asks students to do. Do not make the assignment easier.

Step 1. List what a student could not tell from this prompt. Check each of these:

- the task verb that says what the text must do, such as argue, analyze, or compare ("write" alone does not count)
- the topic and its limits
- the intended reader
- each requirement, and its number
- what is optional
- how the work is graded, including how much grammar counts
- the AI use label (No AI, AI-supported, or AI-integrated)
- if the label is AI-supported, exactly which uses are allowed and which are not
- if the label is AI-integrated, the tool, the steps for using AI, what students must do themselves, and what they turn in to show how they used AI
- which language tools are allowed (dictionary, translation tool, grammar checker)
- where to submit the work and where to find the due date

Step 2. List every idiom, cultural reference, and undefined academic term in the prompt. Suggest plain wording for each one.

Step 3. List any requirement that is worded as a suggestion, such as "you might want to."

Step 4. Rewrite the prompt under these headings: Purpose, Task, Reader, Requirements, Optional, Grading, Tools, Submitting. Use short sentences and common words. Use "must" for requirements. Where information is missing, write [INSTRUCTOR: add ...]. If the AI use label is missing, write one line under Tools: [INSTRUCTOR: add the AI use label and the allowed uses]. Do not invent a purpose, requirements, numbers, or policies. Write in plain text, with no Markdown formatting.

Here is my prompt:

[paste your prompt here]

Or start from scratch with Copilot

If you do not have a prompt yet and prefer a conversation to a form, use this version. Copilot asks you one question at a time and writes the prompt when you say "ready." Allow five to ten minutes.

You are helping a college instructor write a clear assignment prompt that every student can understand, including students who read English as an additional language. Students at this college submit their work in Blackboard.

Interview me one question at a time. Wait for my answer before you ask the next question. Do not draft anything until I say "ready."

Ask about each of these, in this order:

1. the skill this assignment builds, and where students will use it again
2. the type of text and the task, named with one verb
3. what that verb means in my course
4. the topic and its limits
5. the intended reader
6. each requirement, with a number (length in words, number of sources, format)
7. what is optional
8. what counts most in the grade, and how much grammar and word choice count
9. the AI use label (No AI, AI-supported, or AI-integrated). If I answer AI-supported, ask which uses are allowed (for example, brainstorming or feedback on a draft) and which are not. If I answer AI-integrated, ask which tool students use, what they do with AI, what they must do themselves, and what they turn in to show how they used AI
10. which language tools are allowed (dictionary, translation tool, grammar checker)
11. where students submit the work and find the due date

If my answer is vague, ask one follow-up question. If I say "skip," move on.

When I say "ready," write the prompt under these headings: Purpose, Task, Reader, Requirements, Optional, Grading, Tools, Submitting. Use only what I told you. Do not add requirements, limits, numbers, places, or college policies that I did not give. If I described something in words, such as grading, keep my words and do not ask for a different format. For anything I skipped, write [INSTRUCTOR: add ...]. Use short sentences and common words. Do not use idioms. Use "must" for requirements. Write in plain text, with no Markdown formatting.

Start with question 1.

Before you use either prompt

- **Sign in to Copilot with your college account.** For the college's approach to AI in courses, see the [AI Literacy Faculty Playbook](https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/ai-literacy-playbook/) (<https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/ai-literacy-playbook/>).
- **Share only the assignment.** Leave out student names and student work.
- **Read the result against your original.** Copilot can change your meaning while it simplifies your wording. The bracketed notes mark places where it needed information from you.
- **You make the decisions.** The tool finds gaps. What the assignment requires is up to you.

Related pages

[Writing a clear assignment prompt](#)

The six practices behind this tool, with a before-and-after example.

[Setting expectations for discussions and journals](#)

What to add when the assignment is a discussion or a journal.

[Setting expectations for translation, grammar tools, and AI](#)

How to write the Tools line and the use note.

FOR STUDENTS [Understanding a writing prompt](#)

The student page that teaches how to read the prompt you write.

Rubrics and Where Language Accuracy Fits

Use this page when you are building or revising a rubric, or deciding how much grammar should count.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/instructors/rubrics-language.html>

What students experience

A rubric is one of the hardest texts in a course to read. It is dense, its levels differ by a single adverb, and its vocabulary (“sophisticated,” “adequate,” “demonstrates command”) describes a judgment without saying what to do. Students reading in an additional language meet all of that at once.

The language row causes three specific problems:

- **The top level is out of reach.** A description such as “free of grammatical errors” tells a writer who is still learning English that the highest level is closed, whatever the quality of the thinking.
- **Language is graded twice.** Sentence-level errors lower the reader’s impression of the whole paper, and the scores for ideas and organization fall with it.
- **Language is graded in secret.** The rubric has no language row, but points come off for grammar anyway. Students cannot plan for a criterion they cannot see.

The CCCC statement on multilingual writers addresses the second problem directly. It asks instructors to weigh several features of a text, including topic development, organization, grammar, and word choice, “rather than focus only on one or two of these features that stand out as problematic.” The same statement describes learning academic literacy in an additional language as “a complex, recursive, lifelong process.” One semester will not finish it, and a rubric should not assume that it will.

Decide first: is accuracy an outcome of this assignment?

How much language should count depends on what the assignment is for. Answer this question before you write the rubric.

Where language accuracy fits

If	Then
Sentence-level accuracy is a stated outcome of the course, as in a writing course	Give language its own row, with a weight that matches the outcome. Describe each level by its effect on a reader.
The assignment measures content knowledge, as in a history or biology paper	Give language a small row, or none. If there is no row, do not take points off for language anywhere else.
The writing is low stakes, such as a journal or a discussion post	Consider grading ideas and completion only, and say so.

In every case the principle is the same: one row, one weight, stated in advance.

Six practices

1

Give language one row, and keep it there

When you score the other rows, set sentence-level errors aside. A paragraph with a clear main idea and article errors still has a clear main idea.

2

Describe language by its effect on the reader

“Errors do not affect meaning” is a standard a developing writer can reach and an instructor can apply consistently. “Free of errors” and counts of errors are neither.

3

Write each level as something a student can see or do

Replace adverbs with actions. “Explains how each source supports the argument” can be checked. “Integrates sources effectively” cannot.

4

Show the weights

Put points or percentages on each row. Students use them to decide where to spend their time, and the weights hold you to your own priorities when you grade.

5

Share the rubric with the prompt, and show the top level

The CCCC statement says that, when possible, “instructors should provide students with a rubric that articulates assessment criteria.” An annotated example of strong work shows what the words in the top row mean (Winkelman et al., 2016).

6

Comment on patterns, not on every error

The CCCC statement recommends “prioritizing two or three mechanical or stylistic issues” for each writer to work on during a course. A student can act on two patterns. A page covered in corrections gives no starting point.

A PRACTICE TO TRY

Score a paper in two passes. On the first pass, read for the argument, the evidence, and the organization, and score those rows. On the second pass, score the language row. This is practitioner advice, not a research finding.

Before and after

Both versions are the language row of a rubric. The second is the one students see on the paired student page.

BEFORE

MECHANICS, 10 POINTS

Excellent: Free of grammatical and spelling errors.

Good: Few errors.

Fair: Several errors.

Poor: Numerous errors that are distracting.

AFTER

LANGUAGE, 20 OF 100 POINTS

Strong: Sentences are clear. Errors are few and do not affect meaning.

Developing: Some errors make the reader slow down, but the meaning is clear.

Beginning: Errors often make the meaning unclear.

What changed

- **“Free of errors” is gone.** The top level now describes clear writing with a few errors, which is what strong student writing looks like.
- **Counts became effects.** “Few” and “several” leave the line between levels to each grader. “The meaning is clear” gives a test.
- **“Distracting” became “unclear.”** The first measures the reader’s patience. The second measures the writing.
- **The weight is shown as part of the whole.** “20 of 100” tells a student how language compares with everything else.
- **The level names changed.** “Developing” and “Beginning” describe a stage. “Fair” and “Poor” describe a verdict.

Wording you can copy

Replace the text in brackets.

When language has a row

Language is graded in one row of the rubric, worth [amount]. In that row, I look at whether your meaning is clear. Errors that do not affect your meaning will not lower your score in the other rows.

When language is not graded

In this assignment, I grade your [ideas, evidence, and organization]. Grammar and spelling are not graded. If a sentence is unclear to me, I will ask you about it.

Level descriptions for a language row

Strong. Sentences are clear. Errors are few and do not affect meaning.

Developing. Some errors make the reader slow down, but the meaning is clear.

Beginning. Errors often make the meaning unclear.

Links for students

The paired student page teaches the parts of a rubric, how to use the points, and how to read the small words that separate one level from the next. You can add this line to an assignment in Blackboard:

Before you start, read [Reading a Rubric](#). It shows you how to use the rubric to plan and check your work.

The [Assignment prompt builder](#) asks how grammar and word choice count, and adds your answer to the prompt.

Sources

- Conference on College Composition and Communication. (2020). [CCCC statement on second language writing and multilingual writers](https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting) (<https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting>). See Part One; “Assessment” in Part Two; and “Response to Student Writing” in Part Four.
- Winkelmes, M., Bernacki, M., Butler, J., Zochowski, M., Golanics, J., & Weavil, K. H. (2016). A teaching intervention that increases underserved college students’ success. *Peer Review*, 18(1/2), 31–36.

Focused, Actionable Feedback

Use this page when you are giving feedback on student writing in Blackboard, typed or recorded.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/instructors/actionable-feedback.html>

What students experience

Typed comments in the learning management system are the main way writing instructors respond to students. In a national survey of 235 online and hybrid writing instructors, 73% frequently used LMS tools to comment on student work, while only 12% frequently gave audio feedback and 10% video feedback (CCCC OWI Standing Group, 2021, pp. 26, 71). At OCTC, the split is similar.

In Blackboard, feedback can sit in four places: overall feedback, inline comments on the submitted file, comments on individual rubric criteria, and recordings. Each place answers a different question, and students often check only the first. The grade appears first, so a student who reads only that never opens the file where most of the specific comments are.

Three things make feedback harder for multilingual learners to use, and most of them affect every student. The same survey's authors conclude that practices for supporting students learning English in writing courses "need continued attention" (p. 12).

- **Softened requests.** "You might consider adding an example" is a polite request. A student reading literally can hear it as optional. "What do you mean here?" can read as a question to answer, not a sentence to rewrite.
- **Short marks.** "awk," "wc," and "?" in the margin carry a lot of meaning for the instructor and very little for a student who has not learned the code.
- **Volume.** Thirty marked errors can bury the two comments about the argument, and they tell the student that grammar matters most, whether or not the rubric says so.

Recorded feedback raises its own questions. It carries tone and warmth well, and many students find it more personal. That same quality can make it harder to take in: the student hears critique in the instructor's voice, at the instructor's pace, with no easy way to return to one point. Some students play a recording once and do not return to it, even when they would reread typed comments. This is practitioner observation from OCTC faculty development work. Nationally, 60% of surveyed instructors give instructions or feedback to English language learners in more than one mode, and only 14% rely more on audio (CCCC OWI Standing Group, 2021, p. 36).

Seven practices

1

Tell students where to look

Say which places you use and in what order to read them. One line with the grade does it: "Start here, then open your file for my comments."

2**Lead with two or three priorities**

Use the overall feedback for the few changes that matter most, tied to rubric criteria. Inline comments then support those priorities instead of competing with them. Start by naming what is working. The CCCC statement asks instructors to learn strategies for “seeing and promoting the textual features that are rhetorically effective.”

3**Write requests as requests**

Keep the warmth in the opening and closing, and state each requested change directly. “Add an example to paragraph 2” is kind and clear. “You might consider an example” is kind and unclear.

4**Mark patterns, not every error**

For sentence-level issues, name the pattern, mark two or three examples, and ask the student to find the rest. Link the matching toolkit page. Match the amount of language marking to what the rubric says language is worth. For multilingual writers, the CCCC statement recommends “prioritizing two or three mechanical or stylistic issues that individual multilingual writers should focus on throughout the duration of the course.”

5**Give a key for your marks**

If you use abbreviations, put a short key in the syllabus or in the assignment. The paired student page has a common set you can adopt or edit.

6**Pair a recording with typed action items**

Use the recording for tone and overall direction, and keep it short. Add two or three typed action items in the overall feedback, so students have a list to work from. Video Studio captions and transcribes recordings automatically; check the captions for course terms and names. Captioning labor is one of the accessibility challenges instructors report most (CCCC OWI Standing Group, 2021, p. 37), and automatic captions remove most of it. Tell students about the playback speed and transcript options in the three-dot menu.

7

Close the loop

Ask students to respond with one or two changes they plan to make, or to attach a short revision plan to the next draft. It shows you who used the feedback, and it gives students a reason to read it.

ABOUT THESE PRACTICES

Practices 2 and 4 follow the CCCC statement on second language writing. The others are practitioner advice from faculty development work at OCTC. The survey cited above describes what instructors do; it does not test which practices work best.

Before and after

Both versions respond to the same first draft. The second matches the example on the paired student page, with its requests stated directly.

BEFORE

Good start! You might consider stating your main point earlier. I wonder if paragraph 3 fits. Watch grammar throughout—see my comments.

AFTER

Your topic is interesting, and your personal example in paragraph 2 is strong. For your next draft:

1. State your main point in the first paragraph. (Rubric: Thesis)
2. Remove paragraph 3, or explain how it supports your main point. (Rubric: Organization)
3. Fix verb tense when you describe last summer. I marked three examples; find the others. See [Verb tense](#).

Open your submitted file to see my comments next to your sentences.

What changed

- **Praise became specific.** The student knows what to keep.
- **Suggestions became numbered requests**, each tied to a rubric criterion.
- **“Watch grammar throughout” became one pattern**, with a set number of marked examples and a page to practice with.
- **The last line says where the rest of the feedback is.**

Wording you can copy

Replace the text in brackets.

For the syllabus: how feedback works in this course

I give feedback in [overall feedback / comments on your file / the rubric / recordings]. Read the overall feedback first. It lists the most important changes. Then open your submitted file to see my comments next to your sentences. When I write a suggestion, such as “you might add,” treat it as a request unless I say it is optional. If a comment is unclear, ask me.

Overall feedback template

What is working: [one specific strength].

For your next draft:

1. [Most important change.] (Rubric: [criterion])
2. [Second change.] (Rubric: [criterion])
3. [One sentence-level pattern, if any.] I marked [number] examples; find the others.

Open your submitted file to see my comments next to your sentences.

With a recording

I recorded your feedback this time. Use the captions button, or open the transcript from the three-dot menu, where you can also slow the recording down. Your action items are typed below.

Link for students

The paired student page shows where each kind of feedback appears in Blackboard, gives a table of common marks, teaches students to read softened comments as requests, and walks through a revision plan. You can add this line to an assignment or an announcement:

Before you revise, read [Understanding Instructor Feedback](#). It shows you where to find all of your feedback and how to turn it into a plan.

For how much language accuracy should count, see [Rubrics and where language accuracy fits](#).

Sources

- CCCC Online Writing Instruction Standing Group. (2021). [*The 2021 state of the art of OWI report*](https://sites.google.com/view/owistandinggroup/state-of-the-art-of-owi-2021) (<https://sites.google.com/view/owistandinggroup/state-of-the-art-of-owi-2021>). Conference on College Composition and Communication. See “Executive Summary” and “Student Experience.”
- Conference on College Composition and Communication. (2020). [*CCCC statement on second language writing and multilingual writers*](https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting) (<https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting>). See Part Four, “Response to Student Writing.”

Setting Expectations for Translation, Grammar Tools, and AI

Use this page when you are deciding which language tools and AI uses to allow on an assignment.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/instructors/tool-expectations.html>

What students experience

Students use translation apps, autocorrect, grammar checkers, and AI chat tools every day, and most do not think of the first three as AI. The tools also blur the line themselves. Word's Editor, grammar checkers, and translation sites now offer full rewrites next to simple corrections, often in the same panel.

So a syllabus line such as "AI is not permitted" leaves most of the question open. Is spell check allowed? A dictionary? Translating a reading? Two problems follow. Careful students stop using legitimate supports to stay safe, and multilingual learners are often in this group. Other students cross a line they did not know was there.

Variation adds to the problem. The MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force notes that differing policies across instructors make it hard for students to predict what is acceptable in their next class (2023, p. 8). The task force also cautions against restrictions that make writing for class very different from writing at work and in daily life (Recommendation 7).

Seven practices

1**Put an AI use label on every assignment**

Use No AI, AI-supported, or AI-integrated, and name the allowed uses. The [AI Label Maker](https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/ai-literacy-playbook/ai-label/) (<https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/ai-literacy-playbook/ai-label/>) formats the label for Blackboard. Stating the task and criteria openly is central to transparent assignment design (Winkelmes et al., 2016).

2**Ask about language tools separately from the label**

The label answers the AI question. It does not tell students whether a dictionary, spell check, or a translation tool is allowed. Add a Tools line that names each one. The task force lists dictionaries and grammar checkers among the existing tools English language learners rely on (2023, p. 10).

3

Draw the line at who leads

AI-supported means the student leads and the tool supports. A tool that gives information (a definition, a flagged error) supports. A tool that writes or rewrites the student's sentences leads, whatever it calls itself, so it falls under the label. Say this directly. The task force warns that AI tools push writing toward a standardized English (2023, p. 7). A student's own sentences, with their errors, are what you can teach from.

4

Separate reading support from writing support

Translating a reading to understand it is a different question from translating a draft into English. Many instructors would allow the first and not the second, but few say so. This is practitioner advice. We did not find a study that tests it directly.

5

Name Copilot and say what to do when unsure

Students and faculty have Microsoft Copilot through OCTC's Microsoft 365. Naming the tool removes a guess, and an "ask me first" line makes the question safe to ask.

6

Ask every student for a short use note

A two-sentence note (what the student used, and what they did themselves) builds the habit of transparency the task force recommends (Recommendation 5). The *MLA Student Guide to AI Literacy* lists discussing one's process openly as part of AI literacy. Ask all students, so that no group carries a special burden of proof.

7

Do not treat detection scores or language differences as evidence

The task force calls AI detection unreliable and biased, with false positives that can lead to wrongful accusations (2023, p. 7), and it urges caution about detection tools (Recommendation 4). Features of second-language writing are not signs of AI use, and neither is unusually polished writing from a student who used a permitted tool. If you have a concern, talk with the student about how the work developed.

WHERE STUDENTS ARE STARTING

Many students already use these tools daily but have never been asked to sort them by who leads. Early in a course, show the Tools line on an example assignment and talk through one case of each kind.

Before and after

Both versions cover the same essay. The second matches the example on the paired student page.

BEFORE

Use of AI tools, including Grammarly and translators, is strictly prohibited and will be treated as academic dishonesty.

AFTER

AI USE: AI-SUPPORTED

You may use Copilot to brainstorm topic ideas and to explain grammar rules. Your essay must be written in your own words. See the AI Course Policy in the syllabus.

TOOLS

You may use a dictionary, spell check, and a translation tool to understand the readings. Do not use a translation tool or a rewriting tool on your essay. If a tool offers to rewrite your sentences, that counts as AI use.

TELLING ME HOW YOU USED HELP

At the end of your essay, add one or two sentences: what you used, and what you did yourself.

QUESTIONS

If you are not sure whether a tool is allowed, ask me before you use it.

What changed

- A ban became a label with named uses.
- “Grammarly and translators” became a **Tools line** that separates the uses you allow from the ones you do not.
- The **rewrite line is stated**. Students no longer have to guess where a grammar tool stops being a grammar tool.
- “Academic dishonesty” became a **use note and an invitation to ask**. Your misconduct policy still applies. The assignment now answers the questions that lead to unintended violations.

Wording you can copy

Replace the text in brackets. Put the Tools line directly under the AI use label.

Tools line

Tools.

- Dictionary: [allowed / not allowed]
- Spell check: [allowed / not allowed]
- Translating the readings: [allowed / not allowed]

- Translating your own writing: [not allowed / allowed for (purpose)]
- Any tool that rewrites your sentences counts as AI use. Follow the AI use label.

If you are not sure whether a tool is allowed, ask me before you use it.

Use note

At the end of your work, add one or two sentences: which tools gave you significant help, what you used them for, and what you did yourself. For example: “I asked Copilot to explain the difference between *affect* and *effect*. I corrected my sentences myself.”

For the syllabus

Each assignment has an AI use label and a Tools line. They can change from one assignment to the next, so check them every time. Using a dictionary, spell check, or a translation tool to understand a reading is different from using a tool to write or rewrite your sentences. If the directions do not answer your question, ask me. Asking first is always welcome.

Links for students

Three student pages pair with this one. The first teaches students to check the label and the Tools line, and to ask “who leads?” The second gives two Copilot prompts that explain without doing the work. The third shows how to keep a writing record. You can add these lines to an assignment in Blackboard:

Before you use any tool on this assignment, read [Translation, Grammar Tools, and AI: Check the Rules First](#).

If AI is allowed, [Using AI to Learn](#) has two Copilot prompts that help you understand the assignment and practice your writing.

To keep track of your drafts and the help you used, read [Keeping a Record of Your Writing Process](#).

For the college’s approach to AI in courses, see the [AI Literacy Faculty Playbook](#) (<https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/ai-literacy-playbook/>). To draft a full prompt with a label and a Tools line, use the [Assignment prompt builder](#).

Sources

- MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI. (2023, July). [MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI working paper: Overview of the issues, statement of principles, and recommendations](#) (<https://aiandwriting.hcommons.org/>). Modern Language Association of America and Conference on College Composition and Communication. See “Risks to Students,” “Risks to Programs and the Profession,” “Benefits for Writing Instruction,” and Recommendations 4, 5, and 7.
- Modern Language Association of America. (2024). *Student guide to AI literacy*. Written by participants of the Critical AI Literacy for Reading, Writing, and Languages Workshop, an initiative of the MLA-CCCC Task Force on Writing and AI. The guide reflects its

authors' views, not official MLA, CCCC, or NCTE policy.

- Winkelmes, M., Bernacki, M., Butler, J., Zochowski, M., Golanics, J., & Weavil, K. H. (2016). A teaching intervention that increases underserved college students' success. *Peer Review*, 18(1/2), 31–36.

Talking About Writing Process and Authorship

Use this page when you want to set process expectations, or you have a concern about whether work is a student's own.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/instructors/process-authorship.html>

What students experience

A conversation about whether work is a student's own is one of the most stressful moments in a course, for both people. For a multilingual student, three things can make it harder.

- **Language differences can be misread as evidence.** A sudden improvement may come from a permitted tool, a tutor, or weeks of effort. An unusual phrase may come from another language. Neither is evidence of AI use.
- **Detection tools are not reliable.** The MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI describes surveillance and detection approaches as “unreliable and biased,” producing false positives that can lead to wrongful accusations (2023, p. 7).
- **Expectations about sources differ.** The CCCC statement notes that “textual ownership and the ownership of ideas are concepts that are culturally based.” It calls patchwriting, staying too close to a source's wording, “a natural part of the process of learning to write in a second language.”

A student who is accused, and who is not confident in spoken English, may not be able to explain their process under pressure, even when the work is their own.

Seven practices

1**Set the process expectations at the start**

Before the first major assignment, say how you would like students to keep a record of their work: drafts in one Word document saved to OneDrive, notes, and short notes on significant help. Ask this of every student. A record that is normal for everyone is not a burden placed on a few.

2**Build process into the assignment**

Collect a proposal, an outline, or a draft along the way. Conferences and brief check-ins show you how the work is developing, and they give students practice explaining it.

3

Do not use a detection score as evidence

A score is not a finding. The task force urges “caution and reflection about the use of AI text detection tools” (Recommendation 4). If you have a concern, start from the work and the student, not from a percentage.

4

Do not treat language differences as signs of AI use

Unusual phrasing, uneven grammar, or a change in fluency between drafts are common in second language writing. So is polished writing from a student who used a permitted tool or a tutor.

5

Start a concern with a conversation, not an accusation

Ask the student to walk you through how the work developed, using their record if they have one. Ask open questions. Offer to meet in writing as well as in person, and let the student take time to answer. The goal is to understand what happened.

6

Teach source use more than once

The CCCC statement says instructors “should not expect multilingual writers to perfectly execute these practices after a single lesson.” When you find patchwriting, treat a first instance as a teaching moment, and point to the paired student page on paraphrase.

7

Remember what a record can and cannot show

A writing record shows how work developed, and it supports a conversation. It does not prove or disprove AI use, and its absence does not prove misconduct. Follow your college’s academic integrity process for any formal step.

ABOUT THESE PRACTICES

Practices 3, 4, and 6 draw on the MLA-CCCC working paper and the CCCC statement. Practices 1, 2, 5, and 7 are practitioner advice from faculty development work at OCTC, consistent with the task force’s call for academic integrity approaches that “support students rather than punish them” (Recommendation 4).

Before and after

Both messages respond to the same concern: an essay that reads very differently from the student's earlier work.

BEFORE

The AI detector flagged your essay at 87%. This does not sound like your writing. Explain yourself, or you will receive a zero.

AFTER

Thank you for submitting Essay 2. I would like to talk with you about how this essay developed, as I do with many students during the term. Could we meet this week in my office hours, or on Teams? Please bring your Word file, or share it with me, so we can look at the version history and your notes together. If you used any tools or help, that is fine to mention. I want to understand your process.

What changed

- **The detection score is gone.** It is not evidence, and it starts the conversation as an accusation.
- **"Does not sound like you" is gone.** A change in writing has many explanations.
- **The penalty is gone.** No decision is made before the conversation.
- **The message asks for the record** and invites the student to describe any help they used.

Wording you can copy

For the syllabus

Writing is a process, and I want to see yours. For major assignments, keep your drafts in one Word document saved to OneDrive, and keep your notes and a short note about any significant help you used. I may ask any student to talk with me about how their work developed. That conversation is a normal part of this course, not an accusation.

Questions for a process conversation

- How did you choose this topic?
- Show me where you started. What changed between your first draft and this one?
- Which source was most useful? Tell me about it in your own words.
- What help or tools did you use, and for which parts?
- Which part of this essay are you most satisfied with?

Links for students

Two student pages pair with this one. The first teaches every student to keep a writing record and to say clearly who did what. The second teaches paraphrase and shows what “too close” looks like. You can add these lines to an assignment:

Keep a record of your work as you go. [Keeping a Record of Your Writing Process](#) shows you how.

Before you use a source, read [Quote, Paraphrase, or Summarize](#).

For expectations about AI and language tools, see [Setting expectations for translation, grammar tools, and AI](#).

Sources

- Conference on College Composition and Communication. (2020). [CCCC statement on second language writing and multilingual writers](https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting) (https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting). See Part Two, “Textual Borrowing.”
- MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI. (2023, July). [MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI working paper: Overview of the issues, statement of principles, and recommendations](https://aiandwriting.hcommons.org/) (https://aiandwriting.hcommons.org/). See “Risks to Students” and Recommendations 4 and 5.

Knowing Your Students' Language Backgrounds

Use this page when you want to understand the multilingual learners in your course without making assumptions.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/instructors/language-backgrounds.html>

Who multilingual learners are

"Multilingual learner" describes a very wide group. In one OCTC class, it can include an international student who studied English for years in school, an adult who moved to Kentucky as a refugee and is now in a technical program, and a student who grew up in Owensboro speaking another language at home and has used English at school since kindergarten. These students have little in common except that they use more than one language.

The CCCC statement makes three points that matter in a classroom:

- **Literacy in the first language varies widely.** "Multilingual writers can have a wide range of literacies in their first languages." Some students have written research papers in another language; others learned to read and write mainly in English.
- **Expectations about writing vary too.** "Multilingual writers may demonstrate different expectations for and understandings of discourse," such as how directly to state a claim, or how to use a source.
- **Many students do not use the label.** "Not all students self-identify as 'ESL,' 'multilingual,' or 'second language' students." A student who grew up in the U.S. may not think of themselves as a language learner at all, and may not welcome being treated as one.

The practical result: you usually cannot tell from a name, an accent, or one piece of writing what a student knows, what they need, or how they see themselves. The statement asks instructors to "consider students' individual experiences and avoid reducing students to stereotypes."

Six practices

1

Design for the whole range, then adjust

Clear prompts, annotated models, defined terms, and written versions of spoken instructions help every student, and they help multilingual learners most. The other Instructor Companion pages give specific ways to do this. Start there before you single out any student.

2

Ask every student the same open question

Early in the term, ask the whole class one optional question about how they learn, such as the one under “Wording you can copy.” The CCCC statement encourages writing programs to learn about students’ language use and backgrounds. In a single course, a voluntary question asked of everyone does this without singling anyone out.

3

Never ask about nationality or status

Do not ask where a student is “really” from, about citizenship or immigration status, or for documents. None of it is needed to teach writing well. Questions about languages and learning are enough, and students may skip them.

4

Do not judge ability from language alone

Errors in English sentences are not evidence of weak thinking, poor preparation, or low effort. A student can build a strong argument in sentences that still show a second language. Read for the ideas first. The CCCC statement notes that second language prose can “violate” an instructor’s “aesthetic expectations for academic English,” and asks instructors to look for “the textual features that are rhetorically effective.”

5

Offer support to everyone, by name

Instead of telling one student to “get help with English,” tell the whole class where help is: the Teaching and Learning Center, and the toolkit pages for each skill. Students choose what they need, and nobody is marked as needing it.

6

Treat multilingualism as a strength

Students who work across languages notice how language works. When it fits the course, invite comparisons: how a task, a concept, or a form of writing works in another language a student knows. Make it an invitation, never a requirement.

ABOUT THESE PRACTICES

Practices 2 and 4 draw on the CCCC statement. Practices 1, 3, 5, and 6 are practitioner advice from faculty development work at OCTC.

Before and after

Both messages respond to the same draft: a strong argument, with frequent errors in articles and verb tense.

BEFORE

Your grammar makes this hard to read. Is English your first language? You should go to the TLC for ESL help before you submit anything else.

AFTER

Your argument is clear, and your second reason is especially convincing. For your next draft, focus on two patterns: articles (*a*, *an*, *the*) and staying in the past tense when you describe last year. I marked three examples of each. The toolkit pages on [articles](#) and [verb tense](#) can help, and so can a tutor in the TLC.

What changed

- **The question about the student's first language is gone.** It was not needed to give useful feedback.
- **The ideas come first.** The student learns what is working.
- **"Grammar" became two named patterns,** with marked examples and a page for each.
- **The TLC is offered as a resource,** not a requirement tied to a label.

Wording you can copy

An optional question for the first week

This question is optional, and your answer does not affect your grade. It helps me teach this class well.

What should I know about how you learn best? For example: languages you speak or read, how much writing you have done in school, your work schedule, or anything about reading or writing in English that you want me to know.

For the syllabus

Students in this class bring many languages and many kinds of school and work experience. That variety makes our discussions better. If you want help with any part of reading or writing in this course, the Teaching and Learning Center offers free tutoring, and [The Language of College](#) has short lessons on college reading, writing, and grammar.

Links for students

No student page pairs with this one directly, on purpose. Students do not need to know they are part of a group to find help. Link the whole toolkit, or a skill page for the task in front of them:

- The toolkit home page, for the full list of topics.

- [Interacting in class: common expectations](#), for expectations in U.S. college classes that are often unstated.
- [College terms you will hear in your first weeks](#), for students new to college vocabulary.

For which terms to use when you talk or write about multilingual learners, see [Terms for language learners: what to use, and when](#).

Sources

- Conference on College Composition and Communication. (2020). [CCCC statement on second language writing and multilingual writers](https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting) (<https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting>). See Part One, “General Statement”; Part Four, “Cultural Beliefs Related to Writing” and “Response to Student Writing”; and Part Five, “Collecting Information on Language Use and Language Background.”

Terms for Language Learners: What to Use, and When

Use this page when you are not sure whether to say ESL, ELL, multilingual, or nothing at all.

Online: <https://octc-instructional-design.github.io/language-of-college/instructors/language-terms.html>

Why the terms keep changing

For decades, “ESL” was the word for almost everything: the students, the classes, the office. That is no longer true. Terms for language learners change with laws, funding, research, and how students describe themselves. Each sector, from K-12 schools to universities to federal agencies, has its own preferred word.

An NCTE glossary written by five teacher educators traces part of this history. Before 2001, school documents mostly used “bilingual” or “ESL,” terms that acknowledge a first language. Federal policy then moved toward “English language learner,” and later toward “English learner” (Alvarez et al., 2017). The authors note that shifting terms can confuse instructors and can sound like jargon. They also quote a student who asked when she would stop being an English language learner and become a user of English.

The overall direction in college writing is from **deficit** terms, which name what a student lacks, toward **asset** terms, which name the languages and skills a student brings. WIDA, for example, describes “multilingual learners” as an assets-based term that emphasizes what a student knows.

For instructors, the question is practical: which word to use, with whom, and when to use none.

Common terms and what they mean

Terms for language learners

Term	What it means	Who uses it now	Notes
ESL (English as a Second Language)	Once the umbrella term for students and programs	Mostly for programs and courses	“An ESL class” is still common. Calling a person “an ESL student” is increasingly dated. “Second” is often inaccurate: English may be a student’s third or fourth language.
ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages)	English instruction for speakers of other languages	Programs, especially adult education	Avoids “second.” Like ESL, it usually names a program.
EFL (English as a Foreign Language)	English studied in a country where it is not the main language	International and overseas contexts	Describes where English is learned, not a student in a U.S. college.

Term	What it means	Who uses it now	Notes
ELL (English language learner)	A student still developing English	Common in K-12 and in many colleges	Widely understood. Some find it limiting, because it describes a student only by what they are still learning.
EL (English learner)	The same group, in shorter form	Federal education law and many state K-12 agencies	Students from K-12 may have been “classified” or “reclassified” as EL. That label usually does not follow them to college.
LEP (limited English proficient)	An older federal term	Some federal documents; federal regulations now define it by “English learner”	Many scholars consider it a deficit term. Avoid it.
Emergent bilingual	A student developing two or more languages	Researchers and some K-12 programs	Proposed to name what students are building, not what they lack.
Multilingual learner	“Students developing proficiency in multiple languages” (WIDA)	WIDA, many K-12 systems, a growing number of colleges	WIDA chose it as an assets-based term. It can include students who are fully fluent in English and still developing another language.
Multilingual writer, second language (L2) writer	A writer working in a language that is not their first	College writing studies, including the CCCC statement	“Multilingual writer” is increasingly common in college composition; the CCCC statement’s title uses both. “L2” is common in research but can be inaccurate for students who spoke two or three languages before English. L1 and L2 mean first and second language.
Generation 1.5	Long-term U.S. residents, often born abroad, educated partly in U.S. schools	Researchers and writing programs	Often fluent in spoken English while still developing academic writing. Many reject the ESL label.
International student	A student who came to the U.S. to study, often on a student visa	International offices, admissions	About enrollment, not language. Many international students are highly proficient in English.

Term	What it means	Who uses it now	Notes
Native / non-native speaker	Whether English was a first language	Everyday speech	Often misleading. Many multilingual students learned English as young children. The CCCC statement calls it “a common misperception” that native speakers are necessarily better teachers of writing.

Glossary entries draw on Alvarez et al. (2017) unless another source is named.

Seven practices

1

Describe the skill, not the student

In feedback and conversation, name the task: “articles and verb tense,” “reading long sentences.” You rarely need a label for the person to help them.

2

Use the term the student uses

If a student calls themselves bilingual, an international student, or a Spanish speaker, use their word. If they do not mention language at all, you do not need to either.

3

Match the term to the setting

Use a program’s or a law’s official name when you refer to that program or law. For a course name, such as an ESL course, use the course name. For general writing about students, “multilingual learners” is current and broad.

4

Avoid deficit terms

“Limited English proficient,” “non-native,” and “ESLs” as a noun for people describe students by a gap. Choose terms that describe a situation or a skill.

5

Do not make the native speaker the standard

Academic English is a learned way of writing for every student, including students who grew up speaking English. Frame expectations around audience, purpose, and genre, not around sounding like a native speaker. Separate language development from thinking: a strong argument can arrive in sentences that still show a second language. See [Knowing your students' language backgrounds](#).

6

Welcome other languages in the process

Students can brainstorm, take notes, or plan in any language they think well in, then write the final work in English. This is often called **translanguaging**. It is different from using a translation tool to produce the English text, which is a separate question for each assignment. See [Setting expectations for translation, grammar tools, and AI](#).

7

Expect the terms to change again

No term is permanent. What matters more than the word is that it is accurate, respectful, and used only when it is needed.

HOW THIS TOOLKIT USES THE TERMS

Student pages use no label at all. They describe skills and tasks, so any student can use them without identifying as a language learner. Instructor pages use “multilingual learners” for students and “second language writing” when following the CCCC statement.

ABOUT THESE PRACTICES

These practices are practitioner advice from faculty development work at OCTC, informed by the sources below. The terms and definitions come from the sources; the advice on when to use them does not.

Before and after

Both versions are the same syllabus line about support.

BEFORE

ESL students and students with limited English proficiency should visit the TLC for help with grammar.

AFTER

Any student who wants help with reading, writing, or grammar can visit the Teaching and Learning Center for

free tutoring. The Language of College also has short lessons on each skill.

What changed

- **The labels are gone.** Students choose the help they need without first placing themselves in a group.
- **“Limited English proficiency,” a deficit term, is gone.**
- **Grammar is one skill among several.** The offer covers reading and writing too.

Wording you can copy

When you need to refer to the group, in writing for colleagues

multilingual learners · students who use more than one language · second language writers (in writing courses)

A welcoming syllabus line

This course welcomes writers who use more than one language. If you do, you bring real strengths to our class. For feedback on any part of your writing, visit the Teaching and Learning Center, or use The Language of College for short lessons on each skill.

When a student brings up their language

Thank you for telling me. Which parts of reading or writing in this course would be most useful to work on? I can point you to resources for those.

Related pages

[Knowing your students' language backgrounds](#)

Who multilingual learners are, and how to learn about students without singling anyone out.

[Focused, actionable feedback](#)

How to name skills and patterns in feedback.

Sources

- Alvarez, S., Gilliland, B., Ortmeier-Hooper, C., McBee Orzulak, M. J., & Pella, S. (2017, September 7). [ESL, ELL, Generation 1.5: Why are these terms important?](https://ncte.org/blog/2017/09/esl-ell-generation-1-5-why-are-these-terms-important/) [Statement of terminology]

and glossary]. National Council of Teachers of English.

- Conference on College Composition and Communication. (2020). [CCCC statement on second language writing and multilingual writers](https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting) (<https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting>).
- WIDA. (n.d.). [Understanding multilingual learners](https://wida.wisc.edu/teach/multilingual-learners) (<https://wida.wisc.edu/teach/multilingual-learners>). Wisconsin Center for Education Research.
- [34 C.F.R. § 300.27](https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/34/300.27) (<https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/34/300.27>), Limited English proficient.

About this edition

The Language of College: A Reading, Writing & Communication Toolkit. Owensboro Community & Technical College.

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