

Philosophy Writing – Grammar Refresher

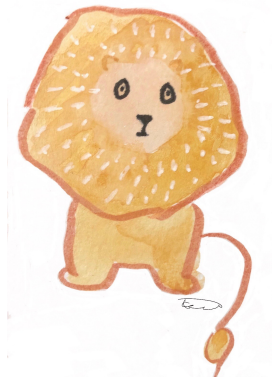
Grammar—how to use English correctly— isn’t always taught in school, and even if you learned it you may have forgotten some things. And some of the sentences you might want to write in your papers could be more complicated than sentences you’ve written before. Complicated ideas often make us want to use complicated language. As you learn to think in more complex ways, you may find yourself unsure about how to express them. This is normal! It’s perfectly normal to be checking your grammar well into college. After all, you’ll be writing more complex papers than you’ve written before.

If you’re not sure about your grasp on grammar, or if you’re not sure about some of the sentences you’re writing lately, this refresher is for you!

Part 1: Basic Sentence Structure

Every sentence should have a **subject** (a noun or noun phrase) and a **predicate** (a verb or verb phrase).

Subjects (nouns: name people, places, or things)	Predicates (verbs: name actions*)
He (she, it, I, you)	Ran
The lion	Was bewildered
Lions	Were bewildered
New York	Is a state
Descartes	Is a punk
Descartes’s awful idea	Isn’t so bad
This argument	Fails



*Verbs can also name states of being. “Is” is a verb. I can make a complete sentence that just says “lions exist.” But probably I want to say more about the lions and what they’re like. You can use “is” (and its relatives, “were,” “are,” “was”) to say something is some way or other. For example, “the lion is bewildered.”

You can make complete sentences by putting together the subjects and predicates in the chart above.

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SENTENCES:

- He ran.
- The lion was bewildered.
- Lions were bewildered.
- New York is a state.
- Descartes is a punk.
- Descartes's awful idea isn't so bad.
- This argument fails.

If a sentence does not have BOTH a subject and a verb, it is NOT A SENTENCE and should not appear in your paper.

NOT sentences:

- Descartes', the French philosopher from the 17th century
- This awful idea Descartes had

Part 2: Subject/Verb Agreement

The verb “to be” in English has different forms for singular and plural subjects, in the present and past tense. These are easy to mess up. If you use a word processor with a grammar checker, it may underline the words if your subjects and verbs do not agree.

Here's a chart to help you know which form of “to be” goes with what:

TO BE

(present: the action is happening now)

I *am*

You *are*

He/she/it *is*

They *are*

We *are*

(past: the action happened in the past)

I *was*

You *were*

He/she/it *was*

They *were*

We *were*

In future tense (the action happens in the future), use *will be* for every type of subject.

Part 3: Possessives

How do you say someone or something *owns* something? You could say “the ball that belongs to Francisco...” or “the idea that belongs to Descartes....” But that's a lot of words. It's easier to say

Francisco's ball

Descartes's idea

To do this, you put an apostrophe at the end of a name. The rule is this:

- Use an 's' after the apostrophe if the noun is singular

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- Francisco's ball
- Descartes's idea
- The women's group (here "women" is a singular noun for a group of people)
- Use an apostrophe with NO "s" after if the noun is plural
 - The millionaires' club
 - The winners' circle
 - The horses' ball

*For singular names that end in "s" like Descartes, it is acceptable to either add an "s" or not. I find it helpful to keep with the rule for singular nouns, and add an "s."

NOTE: Possessives are not plurals. Use an apostrophe ONLY if you want to say someone or something OWNS or HAS a certain thing or property.

The following are **incorrect**

- | | | |
|------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|
| • The owls' ate dinner. | <i>should be</i> | The owls ate dinner. |
| • We sell apples'. | <i>should be</i> | We sell apples. |
| • That lions mane is a mess. | <i>should be</i> | That lion's mane is a mess. |

Part 4: Punctuation

Basic

A complete sentence should end with a period, unless it is a question.

- The elephants swam.
- Vasubandhu's argument succeeds.

If it is a question, it should end with a question mark.

- Did the elephants swim?
- Does Vasubandhu's argument succeed?

Advanced

Commas: Use commas in the following 4 situations

1. After an introductory phrase: However, the argument fails.
2. When you're putting extra information in the sentence to describe the noun:
 - Descartes, **the French philosopher from the 16th century**, argued for the existence of God.
 - **NOTE**: You should be able to take out the stuff between the commas and the sentence should still sound ok.
3. When you're joining two complete sentences with an *and*, *but*, *however*, *or*, or other word that connects clauses.
 - Descartes argued we might be deceived by an evil genius, *but I don't think he's right*.

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- **NOTE:** to leave out the “but” in this sentence would be a comma splice—illegally splicing two sentences together with just a comma. Don’t do that.
4. When you’re listing things:
- Senovia brought sandals, buckets, ginger ale, and books to the beach.

Parentheses () and long dashes –

Best to avoid these. If you do use them, the rule is that the sentence should continue around them as if they were not there. You should be able to remove whatever is between the parentheses or dashes and the sentence should read normally.

- Sally (who wasn’t sure at all about whether she was right) raised her hand anyway.
- I believe that—whatever people may think—all drugs should be legal.

Colons (:) and Semicolons (;)

The basic rule is this. Colons point. Semicolons join complete sentences without needing an “and,” “but,” or other connecting word.

- He makes the following argument: animals have souls, so they ought to have rights.
- Senovia brought buckets to the beach; she was prepared.

Part 5: Parallelism

Parallelism is making sure parallel parts of complex sentences have the same structure.

- She liked *running and swimming*. (NOT: She liked to run and swimming)
- The lion was *old and unhealthy* (NOT: The lion was old and had lots of health problems.)