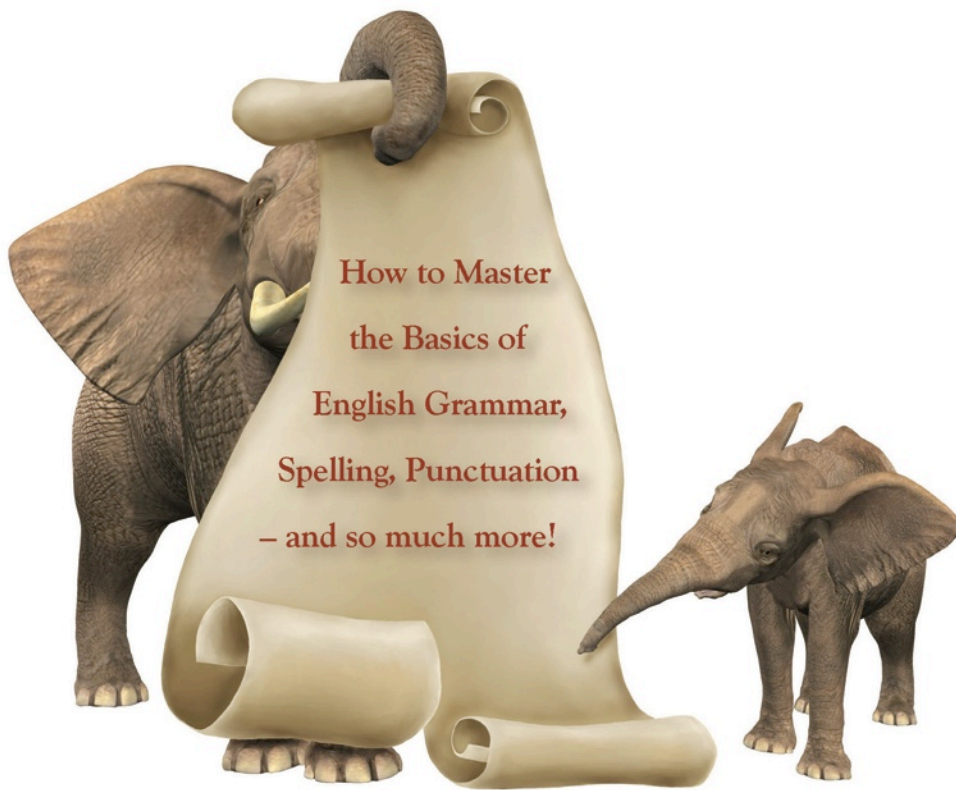


English

Essentials Explained

Jill Bray



**Ten of the Best Tips
FREE!**

Author's Notes

As **Ten of the Best Tips (TBT)** will be studied in not only in the UK (where it was written), but also elsewhere in the world, you may find spellings or phrases you don't normally use. This should not make a major difference. When I ran British and American spellcheckers over the whole text, there were very few spelling differences. I trust speakers of other versions of English will also be helped. I am looking for people who might like to rewrite this in AmE or their own local version of the English language. Email me at jillbray@englishessentialsexplained.com if you are interested.

Preface

English Essentials Explained is a 54,000 word softback book, in five Units.

- Unit 1 Grammar
- Unit 2 Common Errors
- Unit 3 Spelling
- Unit 4 Punctuation
- Unit 5 Style, Drafting, Writing, Proofreading

This first section is taken from the book itself. These 10 Tips give you a taste of what is to be found in each Unit.

Do you recognise yourself here?

- You're a university, college or sixth form lecturer/teacher, who'd like to find a straightforward book to recommend to your students to enable them to write and speak English more accurately.
- You're a student who has to produce written work, and you're concerned about what kind of impression this may make. Your English grammar and usage skills may be inadequate, so you'd like to improve these quickly.
- You're a student who hasn't reached the grades you'd hoped to achieve and think that this may be partly because of your weak English. You're also apprehensive about your future job prospects and think that these would be better if your English were better.
- You've completed your formal education, but are worried that the standard of your written or spoken English may not be good enough for the challenges ahead. You may have already started a job, but your lack of a good foundation in English may hinder your promotion.
- You're a teacher of a subject other than English and are aware that your own English skills need to be more proficient in order for you to advise your students more competently.
- Your first language is not English, and you know that there are gaps in your knowledge of English grammar. You may speak English well, but you'd like to find a book which would enable you to write and speak English with more confidence.
- You're a business, company or website owner who needs to advertise on or off the Internet, but have gaps in your written English, e.g. you don't know how to start drafting a piece of written work so that the style of

your finished, polished work will impress enough to generate a first-rate financial result.

- You'd like to be more confident in work and social situations and react to those around you in the way they expect of you. The times when you should use formal language, informal language and slang are covered here, so you'll be advised which to use when.
- You'd appreciate a reference book to remind you of the basics of grammar and other points connected with speaking and writing.
- You'd like to have a wider vocabulary, but don't know where to start.
- You're prepared to make the effort now in order to acquire a lifetime of invaluable knowledge. Progress is monitored at the end of each Unit (answers given).
- You're not any of the above, but you have always wanted to have *English Essentials Explained!*

English Essentials Explained is easy to use even if you have 'failed' in English in the past. It gives clear explanations for those with no knowledge of any particular point, yet is also comprehensive enough to stretch the brightest minds and those who would like to learn more.

Everyone needs, on occasions, to write and speak correctly, stylishly and effectively in English. Here, you'll learn not only how to, but also how not to. Discover that English grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. are not difficult: they just require some thought and practice.

There's always someone who will judge you by the way you write or speak. Some employers reject a résumé with just one spelling mistake! I once read how a consulting engineer did just that, because, he argued, if an applicant made errors in spelling, he might be equally careless with calculations!

Many people just don't think when they start to write or speak. Don't be one of those writers whose fingers run away with them, whose thoughts are muddled, whose spelling, punctuation, grammar and style leave a lot to be desired. Read what I have to say and give it some thought.

Although you may not use written or spoken Standard English all or even much of the time, situations and occasions could arise when a good knowledge of this, particularly when writing, will definitely help you; so you should be prepared. It's often lack of thought or a slip in concentration, rather than lack of knowledge, which causes mistakes such as 'from' for 'form' or 'you' for 'your'. Once you get used to thinking about your English, it will become second nature – and you, like the small elephant on the cover, won't ever forget again.

There's a misconception among some people, both on and off the Internet, that writing English is easy, and that all you have to do is to sit down at your computer and start. Yes, you could do it that way – but you'll do it a lot better if you study *English Essentials Explained* first.

The Contents of the full version of the book are reproduced below, with those reproduced here in **TBT** highlighted. The full version also contains Review Tests and Answers for you to check and improve your progress.

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TIP 81

Sentence: what is it?

A sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop, question mark or exclamation mark. A sentence is a group of words which makes complete sense.

All writing is made up of sentences, so the way *you* write sentences defines your own style.

The most basic type of sentence is as follows:

Subject	Verb	Object
<i>The man</i>	<i>ate</i>	<i>the apple</i>
<i>She</i>	<i>touched</i>	<i>her hair</i>

Usually, a sentence has a minimum of two words:

Dogs bark.
I sleep.

Work out which is the subject and which the verb in the examples above.

If you can remember the rule about a sentence being a group of words (two or mostly more) with a subject (noun or pronoun) and a finite verb (one with a tense), you *cannot* write an incorrect sentence.

Read the last sentence again, and make sure that you understand and will remember it! It's one of the most important things you'll learn from this book!

TIP 161

Fewer or Less

'Fewer' is used when the number of things *can* be counted.

There are fewer chocolates in this box than there were last night!

'Less' is used when the number of things or qualities *cannot* be counted. 'Less' links with 'amount'.

I have less need of money now than I had twenty years ago.

Confusing these two is very common, usually by saying 'less' for 'fewer' rather than the other way round. A rough guide, if you're not sure, is to use 'less' with singular nouns (less food, less money) and 'fewer' with plural nouns (fewer leaves, fewer books).

TIP 171

Its or It's

Confusing these two (*mostly using 'it's' for 'its'*) is the most common error I see. If you learn nothing else from me, I shall be happy if you *never* make this particular mistake again!

1. All you have to do is to ask yourself: am I writing 'it is' or it has' in an abbreviated form?

Two simple 'yes' examples:
It's (it has) been raining all day.
It's (it is) the best book I've ever read.

**2. If the answer is 'no, I'm not writing 'it is' or 'it has', so I must write 'its'.
Just learn steps 1. and 2. above, and you'll have mastered the commonest
mistake on or off the Internet!**

I repeat: the apostrophe to show possession is only used with NOUNS.

Remembering this will stop you ever putting an apostrophe in 'its' (belonging to it). I repeat: 'its' is a possessive ADJECTIVE.

Note that the error is made far more often this way round:

This printer is the best of it's kind. ✗

The book is in it's sixth edition. ✗

This printer is the best of its kind. ✓

The book is in its sixth edition. ✓

I'll leave you with a simple example using both in the same sentence:

Where's the parcel? It's on its way.

TIP 198

Sat or Sitting

Here are two incorrect examples:

I was sat in my house, reading a book. ✗

Sat in the train, I could see the sunset. ✗

Let's correct these:

I was sitting in my house, reading a book. ✓

Sitting in the train, I could see the sunset. ✓

This is a continuous/progressive use of the verb; in other words, the action goes on for some time. These tenses are formed from the present tense ('sleep', 'swim', 'dig', 'lose', etc.) plus -ing:

I was sleeping, you were swimming, he was digging, they were losing ✓
I was sitting. ✓

Perhaps the error arises because 'I was sat' does exist, but *only if someone else sits you down*. This is a passive construction, such as: *I was hit, you were taught, he was met*, where someone else does the hitting, teaching or meeting.

It may help to think of this construction in terms of smaller people (or animals), when you could say:

The mother picked up the baby and sat him on my lap.

So, '*The baby was sat on my lap*', a quick action done by a third person (the mother), is not the same thing as '*The baby was sitting on my lap*', which could go on for some length of time.)

Stood or Standing (a freebie!)

Apart from the fact that the verb is different, the error is identical with 'sat/sitting', and all the reasons I've given above apply here too.

He was stood at the bus stop. (Not unless someone picked him up and placed him there – unlikely!) ✗
He was standing at the bus stop. ✓

You'll know now why...

The child was stood on a chair (by a second person) doesn't mean the same as:
The child was standing on a chair.

TIP 250

Comma: the worst mistake

Here's the worst mistake with commas. Read and learn!

She studied yoga, it was very interesting. ✗

Tip: if you ever see the word 'it' immediately after a comma, a bell should ring in your head, because it's more than likely to be an example of incorrect punctuation. In this instance, as in most of this type of sentence, use a semicolon, the conjunction 'and', or a full stop to make two sentences:

She studied yoga; it was very interesting. ✓
She studied yoga, and it was very interesting. ✓
She studied yoga. It was very interesting. ✓

The first option here is often the best. Don't be afraid of semicolons – some people never use them).

Try this one yourself, punctuating it in three ways:

I enjoy tennis very much, it's my best sport.

If I were to write this, my spellchecker would suggest a semicolon.

TIP 257

Semicolon: uses

1. The semicolon's main purpose is to unite sentences that are closely associated, or that parallel each other in some way:

"Worth seeing, yes; but not worth going to see." [Samuel Johnson on the Giant's Causeway in Ireland]

2. It's often used as a stronger divider than a comma in a sentence that already has divisions with commas:

He came out of the house, which was a short distance from the road, and saw the child run out; but, instead of wondering what the child was doing, he continued on his way.

3. Use semicolons to separate clauses where there is no conjunction:

"I hate books; they only teach us about something we know nothing about." [Jean-Jacques Rousseau]

4. Use a semicolon when two clauses are joined by a conjunctive adverb or other expression surrounded by commas:

I get up at six o'clock; moreover, I do this every day.

TIP 262

Apostrophe '

This insignificant little mark in the air causes far more problems than any other punctuation mark! It's either used unnecessarily; or left out when it's needed; or put in where it shouldn't be. Advertisers and webmasters (who should know better and certainly pay enough for each glaring error the public sees!) are among some of the worst offenders. A quick example here before we go on:

Get the best nights sleep of your life... ✘
Get the best night's sleep of your life... ✔

Often, it seems that people scatter apostrophes about the page as the spirit moves them, without rhyme or reason. That said, it's probably the hardest punctuation mark to get right consistently. But, if you learn this section and *think*, you should be able to get it right every time – or at least most of the time! One of the problems is that it has two entirely different uses:

1. to show a contraction
2. to show possession

TIP 263

Apostrophe: possession

1. **Firstly, bear in mind that you can never split up a whole word with an apostrophe.** So something like Charle's or Jame's or Jone's is just plain wrong. This is because there's no such word as 'Charle, 'Jame' or 'Jone'.

2. **Don't feel you must put in an apostrophe just because there's an 's' around somewhere.** The following rules will explain when an 's' does need one – and where. Don't be like the shop which proclaimed to all: *'Alway's ready to serve you.'* (Another example of where a whole word has been split by an apostrophe, as I'm sure you noticed.)

3. **Think about 'parent's', 'parents' and 'parents'.** A mistake here could give you one when you have two and vice versa.

A parent's job is never easy. (One parent)

The parents' dance was very enjoyable. (Lots of parents)

"Children begin by loving their parents; after a time they judge them; rarely, if ever, do they forgive them." [Oscar Wilde]

In the third example, there's no hint of an apostrophe: it's just a simple plural: two parents.

4. **Let's think now about the apostrophe before the 's' in a singular noun:**

the boy's father, Harry's teeth.

Here you're writing about 'the father of the boy' and 'the teeth of Harry'. To write 'the boys father' or 'Harrys teeth' would be wrong – but seen all too often.

5. The apostrophe to show possession with plural nouns. Firstly, those ending in 's', the vast majority of plural nouns, have the apostrophe after the 's', a fact which you'll recall, in all probability:

The boys' games (i.e. the games of more than one boy: one boy would be 'the boy's games')

The birds' nests (i.e. the nests of more than one bird: one bird would be 'the bird's nest')

If the word in the plural doesn't end in 's' because singular and plural are not identical (some of the most common are 'men', 'women', 'children', 'people'), the apostrophe is put, as in a singular noun, before the 's':

the men's habits (compare 'the man's habits') ✓

the women's clothes (compare 'the woman's clothes') ✓

the children's toys (compare 'the child's toys') ✓

the people's identities (compare 'the person's identity') ✓

the peoples' identities ✓ (if you're talking about lots of different peoples e.g. Swedes, French, Danes, etc. grouped together)

You've probably got lost on this last one – don't worry, it'll probably never happen!

TIP 325

Style: checklist

As you write, keep the following in mind. Return to this list often to make sure you're keeping to the 'rules' Check that you have:

- Used a short word rather than a long one where there is a choice.
- Not been long-winded.
- Not used too many adjectives.
- Not used clichés.
- Constructed paragraphs correctly.
- Not repeated yourself.
- Not used tautology (saying the same thing more than once, e.g. I, myself, personally).
- Not used jargon, technical words, foreign, words or flowery phrases. If you use any of these, make sure they are absolutely necessary.

- Not been inconsistent, e.g. ice cream, icecream, ice-cream. Decide which you prefer and stick to it.
- Constructed your sentences properly; made them varied in length, and varied between simple; compound; and complex. (Note: as a general rule, and for training your style, avoid complex sentences if you can.)
- Used short sentences with some variety of pace if you can.
- Not taken too long to get it the point.
- Not told your reader but *shown* him.
- Avoided starting sentences with the rather tame 'there' or 'it':

It was a cold day... ✗

The day was cold... ✓

- Used the active rather than the passive (see Unit 1). Your spellchecker may well know this one. Consider changing if you're reminded. However, you may decide that the passive is best in certain circumstances.

The boy threw the ball (active) ✓

The ball was thrown by the boy (passive). ✗

- Made your writing interesting enough for your reader. Of course, if you haven't, s/he is likely to stop reading.
- Made your writing sound sincere. Sincerity follows, provided that you have been clear, brief, committed, etc. without special effort.
- Made your style pleasant and elegant. This may be more difficult at first. Try reading it aloud. It's important that people should enjoy reading what you've written. Of course, in any type of fiction, this is essential. If you write as if you were speaking, your style will be easy, natural and a pleasure for your reader.
- Made your spelling, grammar, and punctuation correct. You'll know by now, I'm sure, that you can't write anything unless all these are in place. If you're still unsure, ask advice from someone you know who has an excellent command of English grammar, etc. It's no use asking someone who is *not* an expert to advise you. It won't help!
- Not written whole sentences or paragraphs that add nothing and should be deleted.

To sum up. Have you:

- used short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs?
- been precise and not vague?
- written in the shortest way that is effective for your purpose?
- put the right words in the right places?

All this will come much easier with practice. Think back to something you thought was difficult, but now you find easy, like cooking a meal, driving a car or using the Internet.

Try writing something every day, even a diary or a few paragraphs in a notebook on anything you like, as long as it has:

- **CORRECT WORDS**
- **CORRECT SENTENCES**

- **CORRECT PARAGRAPHS**

TIP 349

Drafting, Writing and Proofreading

Now it's time to look more closely at how to write. If you take this stage by stage, you'll find it a lot easier than you might have imagined.

I strongly advise against writing without any preparation or revision.

1. First, think about what you have to say or write; perhaps make some notes on paper or in a computer document (the latter is much easier for revising your work). Don't try to put your thoughts in order at this stage. If you have too much material, this can be pruned later. Brainstorm everything to do with the subject without stopping to think too hard.
2. Now read these jottings through and delete those that now seem irrelevant or repetitious.

3. Group words, points or sentences together on the same topic or part of the topic.
4. Try to put these groups in order of importance (you can always change this later).
5. This may be the time to write your introduction and conclusion, but, again, either or both can be left until later if you wish.
6. Write the first draft from the material you have prepared, as above. Don't worry too much about the accuracy of the grammar, punctuation and spelling at this point.
7. Think about the best words to use to convey your intention (use an online thesaurus to help).
8. Now look critically at your first draft. Where are you fairly satisfied? Which parts need more attention? Think about the reader/listener all the time.
9. Make notes all over your work, or add and delete on your computer. It should look a mess at this stage, on paper at least.
10. Try reading it aloud. Where does it flow easily and where is it not so effective? Improve where necessary. Is the meaning clear?
11. Have you left anything out? Said something twice or three times?
12. Write it again, checking the register and paying more attention to grammar, spelling and punctuation.
13. First write your document; and then spellcheck it. Look out for the common errors: 'whose' for 'who's', 'their' for 'there', which your spellchecker could miss.
14. Check the common typos: 'you' for 'your'; 'form' for 'from'; 'to' for 'too'; 'on' for 'in', and any you know that you sometimes make.
15. Print it out. Check it again for errors. Ideally leave it for a few hours or longer. Check it again. Improve it.
16. Check the paragraphs. Does each one seamlessly follow on from the last? Are they different lengths? They probably should be. (If in doubt, shorter is usually better than longer.)
17. Look particularly at your opening sentence and your opening paragraph. Unless obliged to do so, your reader may not get past the first sentence if this does not entice her or him into the rest of the first paragraph. Remember curiosity: this is good device for your first sentence: make the reader want to find out what happens next. Spend a long time on the first sentence and the first paragraph: they are the most important of the whole piece of writing.
18. And the last paragraph: does that go out with a bang or a whimper? Apart from the first sentence, the last one is the most important.
19. Are there any paragraphs which add little or nothing and which could be omitted? Making someone read more than is necessary will not help the overall effect of your work.
20. Check the subject you have been given again. Have you written what is required or have you wandered from the point?
21. You may note that I didn't mention a title (if required) for your work. This is because I didn't want you to waste time at the beginning thinking of a title, as this will evolve as you work. Indeed, it may change several times, as has the title for the work you're now reading. *English Essentials Explained* has had at least three working titles.

22. Now start thinking about the length. If you've been given a precise length, how much shorter or longer is your second draft? Add or subtract words or paragraphs where necessary. Hint: use the word counting facility on your computer if you have one. If no length is stipulated, do you think you've written about the right amount?
23. Now write/type out what could be your final draft. At this stage, you must ensure that spelling, grammar and punctuation are as nearly perfect as you can make them. If you're not sure of a word, substitute another: the English language has many ways of saying the same thing.
24. If it's not too long, read your work aloud, word by word, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph. Check particularly words/grammar etc. that you know you're weak in (e.g. writing sentences or paragraphs which are too long). Go through this draft with just that in mind. You need to read once for the flow and possibly more than once concentrating on the essentials of grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc.
25. Read it through again. Is it good enough? If not, do it again and again, until you're satisfied that this is the best you can possibly make it. After all, sometimes a great deal depends on just one piece of work.
26. Finally, if possible, leave your work after you think it's as good as you can make it and come back to it hours or a day or two later. You're almost guaranteed to improve it if you do this.
27. If you can, ask someone else to look at it for you – I did, and many suggestions were made as a result. Some I accepted, but others I was happy to leave as I had written them.
28. Revision can take as long as or even longer than the first draft. But this stage should not be skipped. Learn to be a perfectionist!
29. And finally, just before you print or send off your finely-honed piece of work, spellcheck it one last time. You might just be surprised by the odd spelling error or extra space that has crept in unnoticed. I always am!

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