

Perfect Your Sentences

The purpose of this book

English is full of problems for a foreign learner. While some of these problem points are easy to explain, others cause difficulty even for the advanced students and learners. For example, how exactly is the *present perfect tense* used? What are the differences between *big, large and great*, between *come and go*? Is *unless* the same as *if not*?

This eBook is a guide to questions of this kind. It addresses 40 points which regularly cause problems for the foreign learner. Rules and guidelines are given, using as little linguistic terminology as possible.

Who will benefit from this book?

This book is aimed at students who wish to improve the quality of their sentences. It is compiled for the use at school or at home.

How to use this book?

Entries are arranged alphabetically. Each entry contains an explanation of a problem, examples of correct usage and typical mistakes. Explanations are, as far as possible, given in simple everyday language.

About the Author

Manjusha Santosh Nambiar is the editor and founder of [perfectyourengish.com](http://www.perfectyourengish.com). She is an ESL tutor and content developer. Her educational qualifications include MA in English.

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Perfect Your Sentences

List of Entries

1. According to
2. Across and through
3. Adjectives ending in -ly
4. Ago and before
5. All and every
6. All right and alright
7. Already and all ready
8. Alternate and alternative
9. Altogether and all together
10. Any and some
11. Anyhow and somehow
12. Articles
13. Article a – correct use
14. Ask and ask for
15. At first and first
16. Avenge and revenge
17. Back and again
18. Bath and bathe
19. Beat and win
20. Because
21. Because and because of
22. Because and for
23. Begin and start
24. Beside and besides

Perfect Your Sentences

25. Besides, except and apart from
26. Between and among
27. Between and during
28. Between and from
29. Big, large and great
30. Born and borne
31. Bring and take
32. But
33. Change of tense
34. Close and shut
35. Cloth and clothes
36. Collective nouns
37. Come and go
38. Common preposition + noun combinations
39. Comparatives and superlatives
40. Comparatives: a common error

1. According to

- Incorrect: **According to me**, she should have resigned earlier.
- Correct: **In my opinion**, she should have resigned earlier.

We do not give our own opinions with **according to**.

2. Across and through

Perfect Your Sentences

The difference between **across** and **through** is similar to the difference between **on** and **in**. We use **through** to talk about movement in three dimensional spaces with things on all sides.

- We walked **across** the field. (= We were on the field.)
- We walked **through** the wood. (= We were in the wood.)

3. Adjectives ending in -ly

- Incorrect: She smiled friendly.
- Correct: She smiled in a friendly way.
- Incorrect: He laughed silly.
- Correct: He gave a silly laugh

Here the error lies in using an adjective instead of an adverb. We use adverbs to modify verbs. Most adverbs end in -ly; there are also a few adjectives that end in -ly. Examples are: *costly, friendly, lively, likely, lonely, lovely, silly and ugly*. There are no adverbs *costly/costlily* or *friendly/friendlily*.

4. Ago and before

- Incorrect: His father died three years **before**.
- Correct: His father died three years **ago**.

Ago is used to count back from the present. It is used with a past tense and a time expression. **Before** is used when you date back from any point of time which is made specific.

- I saw him two years **before** I went to England.

5. All and every

- Incorrect: Every children need love.
- Correct: **Every child needs** love.
- Incorrect: All the light was out.
- Correct: **All the lights were** out.

Every is used with a singular noun. **All** is used with a plural noun.

6. All right and alright

The standard spelling is **all right**, but **alright** is more common although many people consider it incorrect.

7. Already and all ready

- Incorrect: We are **already** for the show.
- Correct: We are **all ready** for the show.
- Incorrect: They have **all ready** arrived.
- Correct: They have **already** arrived.

All ready means '*all are ready*'. **Already** means '*by now*' or '*sooner than expected*'.

- The train had **already** left before we reached the station.
- The patient had **already** died before the doctor arrived.

8. Alternate and alternative

Alternative means '*different*', '*instead*', '*on the other hand*'.

- We will make an **alternative** arrangement if these plans don't suit you.
- I had to go. There was no **alternative**.

Alternate means '*every second*' or '*in turns*'.

He only comes to work on **alternate days**.

9. Altogether and all together

Altogether means '*entirely*' or '*everything considered*'.

- I don't **altogether** agree.
- It is **altogether** wrong to ill-treat animals.

All together simply means '*everybody / everything together*'.

- They **all** went out **together**.
- She put the glasses **all together** in the sink.

Perfect Your Sentences

10. Any and some

Both **some** and **any** suggest an indefinite amount or number. **Some** is more common in affirmative clauses. **Any** is used in questions and negative clauses.

Compare:

- I need **some** pencils. (NOT I need any pencils.)
- Have you got **any pencils**?
- Sorry, I **haven't got any pencils**.

11. Anyhow and somehow

- Incorrect: He did it anyhow.
- Correct: He managed to do it **somehow**.
- Incorrect: He keeps his things somehow in his desk.
- Correct: He keeps his things **anyhow** in his desk. (= He doesn't keep his things in order.)
- Incorrect: He may not come but somehow I shall.
- Correct: He may not come but **anyhow** I shall. (= I will certainly come.)

Use '**anyhow**' to mean 'in disorder'. 'Anyhow' can also mean 'for certain'.

12. Articles

The misuse of **the** and **a** is very common. Here are the basic rules for the use and omission of articles.

Proper nouns (e.g. John, Alice and India) do not take articles.

- Incorrect: The John is my friend.
- Correct: John is my friend.
- Incorrect: The Tokyo is a big city.
- Correct: Tokyo is a big city.

A **singular common noun** (e.g. boy, cat, tree, book, apple etc.) must have an article.

Perfect Your Sentences

- Incorrect: There is cat on roof.
- Correct: There is **a cat** on **the roof**.

A **plural common noun** cannot be used with the article **a**. It is usually used with no article, though '**some**' is sometimes used before it.

Compare:

- **A spider** has eight legs.
- **Spiders** have eight legs.

Remember that a noun can be common in one sentence and proper in another sentence.

A **superlative adjective** is usually used with **the**.

- Incorrect: He is best player in the team.
- Correct: He is **the best player** in the team.

13. Article a – correct use

The article '**a**' placed in front of a noun conveys the idea of 'one'. When writing about two separate objects, a second '**a**' must be used. If the two objects are considered as one, then the second 'a' may be left out.

- Incorrect: I have a hammer and chisel.
- Correct: I have **a hammer** and **a chisel**. (Here we are talking about two separate objects.)
- Incorrect: She has a son and daughter.
- Correct: She has **a son** and **a daughter**.
- Incorrect: The mechanic used a block and a tackle to lift the machine.
- Correct: The mechanic used **a block and tackle** to lift the machine. (Here we are talking about one object.)

14. Ask and ask for

Ask for: ask somebody to give something

Ask: ask somebody to tell something

- He **asked** me **for** a loan. (NOT He asked me a loan.)
- They **asked** ten dollars **for** the book.

Perfect Your Sentences

- If you don't know the answer, **ask** the teacher.
- Don't **ask** me my name. (NOT Don't ask me for my name)

15. At first and first

At first is used to talk about the beginning of a situation. It is often followed by **but**. In other cases, we usually use **first**.

- **At first** everything seemed fine, but then things started going wrong.
- I **first** met her at a restaurant.

16. Avenge and revenge

- Incorrect: I must revenge my father.
- Correct: I must **avenge my father**.
- Incorrect: I must revenge my enemy.
- Correct: I must **take revenge on** my enemy.

These two words are often confused. To '*avenge my father*' means to 'punish someone who has hurt my father'.

17. Back and again

When used with a verb, **back** suggests a return to an earlier situation or a movement in the opposite direction.

- **Give** me my watch **back**. (NOT Give me my watch again.)
- Take your money **back**.
- Put the book **back** on the shelf when you have finished with it.
- These mangoes aren't good. I am taking them **back** to the shop.

When used with a verb, **again** suggests repetition.

- I did not hear what you said. Please say it **again**.
- That was a lovely song. Can you play it **again**?

18. Bath and bathe

In British English, the verb **bath** is used to mean '*wash oneself in a bath tub*'.

Perfect Your Sentences

- Children should **bath** regularly.

The verb **bath** is not used in American English. Instead, the expressions '*have a bath*' or '*take a bath*' are used.

- As I was feeling hot, I **took a bath**.

In British English, **bathe** means '*swim for pleasure*'. It is very formal. In an informal style, we use the expressions '*have a swim*' or '*go for a swim*'.

- He said he had a good **bathe**.

In American English, **bathe** is used to mean '*take a bath*'.

- I always **bathe** before I go to bed. (= I always take a bath before I go to bed.)

Note that *to lie in the sun* is to **sunbathe**.

19. Beat and win

Beat is usually followed by an object which refers to the person you are playing or fighting against.

- She always **beats me** at poker.

Win can also be followed by an object, but it usually refers to things like money or prize. You can also *win in a game, a race, a battle or an argument*.

- She **won the first prize** in the quiz competition.
- She always **wins when we play poker**.

20. Because

- Incorrect: He did not come to school. **Because** he was ill.
- Correct: He did not come to school **because** he was ill.

This is a very common punctuation mistake. **Because** is a subordinating conjunction. It must not be separated from its main clause by a full stop.

21. Because and because of

Perfect Your Sentences

Because is a conjunction. It is used to join two clauses and is followed by a subject and verb.

- We couldn't go out **because it rained.**
- I did it **because he told me to do it.**

Note that the '*because clause*' can come before or after the main clause.

- Because it was so hot, we went home.
- We went home because it was so hot.

Because of is a two-word preposition. It is used before a noun or a pronoun.

- We couldn't go out **because of the rain.**
- I did it **because of** him.

22. Because and for

- Incorrect: I am glad **for** tomorrow is a holiday.
- Correct: I am glad **because** tomorrow is a holiday.

For is hardly wrong, but it is better to use **because** to introduce a casual clause.

23. Begin and start

There is little or no difference between **begin** and **start**. **Begin** is more common in a formal style.

- He **started / began** working when he was 19.
- We will **begin / start** the next lesson tomorrow.
- It is time to **begin / start** work.

Cases where begin is not possible

We *start* (but not begin) a journey or a machine.

- We **started** in the morning and reached before sunset. (NOT We began in the morning...)
- How do you **start** a washing machine? (NOT How do you begin a washing machine?)
- At last the train **started**. (NOT At last the train began.)

24. Beside and besides

Beside is a preposition. It means 'by' or 'next to'.

- The mother sat **beside** her children.
- Who is that fat lady sitting **beside** Peter?

Besides is similar to **as well as**. It is used to add new information to what is already known.

- **Besides** the violin, he can play the guitar and the piano.
- Who was at the party **besides** Jane and Peter?

25. Besides, except and apart from

These expressions often cause confusion. **Besides** usually adds whereas **except** subtracts.

Compare:

- **Besides mathematics**, we have to learn physics and chemistry. (We learn three subjects.)
- He can play all musical instruments **except the flute**. (He can't play the flute.)

Apart from can be used in both senses.

- **Apart from mathematics**, we have to learn physics and chemistry. (= Besides mathematics, we have to ...)
- He can play all musical instruments **apart from the violin**. (= He can play all musical instruments except the violin.)

26. Between and among

We use **between** with two or more clearly separate people or things. We use **among** when the reference is to a group, a crowd, or a mass of people or things which we do not see separately.

- She sat **between** Alice and Mary. (Two clearly separate people)
- She sat **among** her students.
- There is a tourist home **between the woods, the river and the hills**. (Three clearly separate things)
- The tourist home is hidden **among the trees**.

Perfect Your Sentences

We use **between**, not among, after **difference**.

- What is the main **difference between** a square and a rectangle?

27. Between and during

- Incorrect: England grew prosperous between Queen Victoria's reign.
- Correct: England grew prosperous **during** Queen Victoria's reign.
- Incorrect: The First World War was fought during 1914 - 18.
- Correct: The First World War was fought **between 1914 - 18**.

Two events must be mentioned if you want to use **between**.

28. Between and from

A common mistake that is often noticed these days is the use of **to** after **between**.

- Incorrect: The interview will be held between 2 to 4pm.
- Correct: The interview will be held **between 2 and 4 pm**.
- Incorrect: The conference will take place between the 12th to the 18th of this month.
- Correct: The conference will take place **between the 12th and the 18th of this month**.

Or else you can say:

- The interview will be held **from 2 to 4 pm**.
- The conference will take place **from the 12th to** the 18th of this month.

29. Big, large and great

We use **big** and **large** with concrete nouns - the names of objects which we can see or touch. In an informal style, **big** is more common than **large**.

- He has got **big / large** feet.
- They have a **large / big** house in the city.

We use **great** with abstract nouns - the names of things which we cannot see or touch.

- I think it was a **great mistake**.

Perfect Your Sentences

- I have **great respect** for him.

In an informal style **big** is also used with countable abstract nouns. **Large** is not used with abstract nouns.

- I think it was **a big mistake**. (BUT NOT I think it was a large mistake.)

None of these three words are used with uncountable nouns.

- I have got **a lot of luggage**. (NOT I have got big/large/great luggage.)

30. Born and borne

The passive form of the verb **born** (be + born) is used to talk about coming into the world at birth.

- He **was born** to poor parents.
- I **was born** on a Friday.
- She **was born** in Italy.

Borne is the past participle form of the verb **bear**. It is sometimes used to mean 'give birth to' or 'carry'.

- She **has borne** eight children. (= She has given birth to eight children.)

31. Bring and take

- Incorrect: I don't know what to **bring** when I leave for the conference.
- Correct: I don't know what to **take** when I leave for the conference.
- Incorrect: I shall **bring** my wife with me when I go.
- Correct: I shall **take** my wife with me when I go.
- Incorrect: **Take** that book to me at my desk.
- Correct: **Bring** that book to me at my desk.

Use **bring** when something is being moved towards the speaker.

- **Bring** me that book.

Use **take** when something is being moved away from the area of the speaker.

- **Take** that file with you. (Here the file is being moved away from the area of the speaker.)

32. But

- Incorrect: He is the fastest runner and he came last.
- Correct: He is the fastest runner **but** he came last.

But is the conjunction to use when the second main clause gives unexpected or contradictory information.

33. Change of tense

The first verb in a sentence establishes the tense of any verb that comes later. If you begin writing in the past, don't change to the present. Similarly, if you begin writing in the present, don't change to the past.

- Incorrect: In the story, the king *loses* his kingdom, but he *regained* everything in the end.
- Correct: In the story, the king **loses** his kingdom, but he **regains** everything in the end.
- Incorrect: The team *won* yesterday, but *goes* and *loses* this afternoon.
- Correct: The team **won** yesterday, but **went** and **lost** this afternoon.

34. Close and shut

There is little difference of meaning between **close** and **shut**.

- **Shut/close** your eyes.
- Can you **close/shut** the door?
- They **close/shut** the shops at 8 o'clock.

Cases where close is preferred

We *close* (and not *shut*) roads, letters, bank accounts, meetings etc.

- You should **close** your existing account before opening a new account. (NOT You should shut your existing account ...)

35. Cloth and clothes

Cloth is the material used for making clothes. **Clothes** are things you wear.

- His **clothes** are made of expensive **cloth**.

36. Collective nouns

Group words or **collective nouns** take a singular verb if you are talking of the group as a whole. They take a plural verb if you are talking about the individual members of the group.

Compare:

- **The jury is** in the courtroom. (Here we are talking about the whole group.)
- **The jury are** still debating the case. (Here we are talking about the individual members of the group.)

Note: Collective nouns are always singular in American English.

37. Come and go

Come is used for movements to the place where the speaker or hearer is.

- Come to me. (Movement towards the speaker)
- 'Alice, can you come here?' 'Yes, I am coming.' (NOT I am going.)
- Can I come and sit beside you? (Movement towards the hearer)

Go is used for movements to other places.

- Let's **go** and see them. (NOT Let's come and see them.)
- I want to **go** and live in the hills. (NOT I want to come and live in the hills.)

38. Common preposition + noun combinations

- At the cinema; at the theatre; at the party; at university
- By car/bike/bus/train/boat/plane/land/sea/air
- On the radio; on TV; on the phone
- In pen/pencil/ink
- In a suit/raincoat/shirt/skirt/hat etc

39. Comparatives and superlatives

The comparative (e.g. taller, sharper, stronger, heavier, shorter etc.) is used to compare one person or thing with another person or thing.

Perfect Your Sentences

- John is **taller** than Peter.
- Alice is **cleverer** than Mary.

The superlative (e.g. tallest, sharpest, strongest, heaviest, shortest etc.) is used to compare somebody or something with the whole group to which she/he/it belongs.

- John is the **tallest boy** in the class.
- Alice is the **prettiest of** the four girls.
- He is the **best player** in the team.

When a group has only two members, we prefer the comparative to the superlative.

- Incorrect: Take the shortest of the two routes.
- Correct: Take the **shorter** of the two routes.
- Incorrect: She is the prettiest of the two sisters.
- Correct: She is the **prettier** of the two sisters.

40. Comparatives: a common error

In comparative sentences be careful to compare the same part of two things. **That of, these of** and **those of** are necessary words that are often omitted.

- Incorrect: His teaching was like Jesus Christ.
- Correct: His teaching was like **that of Jesus Christ**.
- Incorrect: The size of the shoe must be the same as this shoe.
- Correct: The size of the shoe must be the same as **that of this shoe**.
- Incorrect: My books are better than my friend.
- Correct: My books are better than **those of my friend**.