

**ESSENTIAL  
ENGLISH  
COMPOSITION**

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**FOR COLLEGE-BOUND  
STUDENTS**

**by Leo Lieberman  
and Jeffrey Spielberger**

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# *Introduction*

Every college seeks to help students to write well, to express themselves clearly and intelligently. Writing is both a skill and an art. As a skill, it can be taught and perfected through practice.

A good athlete knows that before he begins to swim or play ball or run he must do warm-up exercises. A good singer understands that before singing an aria, he might want to practice some vocal exercises. A writer too might wish to sharpen his mind with writing exercises before composing an essay. This book will provide the conscientious student with many warm-up drills and exercises. However, exercises are not enough. An athlete is judged on the playing field, and a writer is judged by his essays. Therefore, this book has a section on writing the essay which will provide many useful clues and specific examples to improve writing.

This book has a second function. All of us, sometimes in our lives, have to take tests. Those people who go on to college know that sitting for examinations is part of a monthly (or even weekly) routine. Thus, wise students must discover how to prepare effectively for examinations, how to take examinations, and how to evaluate the results of the examinations. This book will serve this function as well by providing a step-by-step analysis of some of the special examinations that the average secondary school and college student may have to confront.

Test taking is not a pleasant experience, but it need not be a dismal one. For the reader of this work who follows all the suggestions and obeys all the signposts, it can be a rewarding one.

We hope that the reader of this book will benefit in two ways. First, the reader will become a wiser test taker, more at ease with the testing process. Second, and perhaps more important, the reader will learn to communicate effectively by being a good writer.

# *Tips for Studying and Test Taking*

## **Study Tips**

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1. *Do not depend on last minute cramming to prepare for a test.* Although a review of material directly before a test is valuable, this should not be the sole form of studying. It is better to combine several weeks of study periods with a more intensive review prior to the test to reinforce material.
2. *Take good notes.* Note-taking that is disorganized, illogical and confused may hurt more than it helps. Instead of copying material word for word, rephrase important ideas in your own way. Rewriting material that you don't understand serves little purpose. It is better to attempt to understand an idea first and then to write it in such a way that it will be clear as it is reviewed.
3. *Concentrate on the material you are studying and try to avoid distractions.* Watching television or listening to the radio or the stereo can hurt your concentration, as can telephone interruptions and visits from friends. It is hard enough to keep your mind from wandering as you study. Don't add to the problem by providing intrusions. If you don't have a quiet place to study at home, consider using the library at school or in your neighborhood.
4. *Study at a table or desk with all the necessary material clearly and neatly organized.* Lounging in bed while studying seldom helps you stay alert, and facing a window or door may be distracting. Having your books and materials in front of you is far better than interrupting your study to find a piece of paper or a pen.
5. *Eighteen hundred years ago, wise people wrote, "Set a fixed time for study."* Their words are appropriate today. It is better to study an hour a day for ten days than to study five hours a day for two days. Also try to study when you are alert and not overly tired. Set realistic study requirements. Don't be over-ambitious. Study at a regular time and place.
6. *As you review material, determine the important ideas and the major points of each section.*
7. *Keep your study area free of tempting magazines and foods.*
8. *Use the library—it is an excellent study resource. You can borrow books that you do not own.*
9. *Study at a desk with indirect lighting. This will avoid a glare that will tire your eyes.*
10. *Good ventilation will keep you alert.*
11. *Sit in a straight back chair. A soft lounge chair will lull you and encourage your mind to wander.*

## Relaxation Techniques for Test Taking

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It is perfectly normal to be tense before a test. In fact, a little tension can prove helpful because it sets the adrenalin flowing and “peps” you up before the test. But too much anxiety can block your thoughts and interfere with the thinking process. If you become extremely tense, then a little relaxation prior to the exam may help you achieve a higher score.

First, arrive at the examination room at least fifteen minutes before the exam is scheduled to begin. Choose a seat that you feel is best for you—up front, near a window, away from the door—wherever you are most comfortable. Then try one of these two relaxation techniques.

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### Relaxation Technique One

1. Place your chin on your chest and raise it slowly while *breathing in*.
2. Roll your head to one side, allowing it to fall sideways and down as you exhale.
3. Pause briefly, then repeat three to six times, allowing your head to fall on alternate sides.

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### Relaxation Technique Two

1. Sit quietly, feet flat on the floor, arms hanging loosely with hands on lap, palms facing down, eyes closed.
2. Focus on breathing through your nose and say silently to yourself, “in, out . . . one; in, out . . . two; in, out . . . one,” etc. Continue this until you are aware of your *natural breathing rhythm*.
3. Starting at your feet, *contract* (hold for 3 seconds) and then *release* the muscles of your body in the following order: feet, lower legs; thighs, buttocks; stomach, chest; hands (make a fist); arms; shoulders; upper back; jaws (clench your teeth); cheeks; eyes (squeeze shut); eyebrows; forehead and scalp.

Here are three hints to help you stay relaxed:

1. Take advantage of the quiet environment of the room in which the test is being given.
2. Pay attention to the normal rhythm of your breathing; start with deep breathing.
3. Sit in comfortable position to eliminate undue muscular tension.

Practice these relaxation techniques at home prior to the day of the test. If you wish to read more about relaxation techniques, the following two books will be helpful:

1. Benson, Herbert, M.D. *The Relaxation Response*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1975.
2. Selye, H. *Stress Without Distress*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1974.

*Part One*

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TO  
GOOD  
WRITING**

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## CHAPTER 1

# *Basic Rules of Grammar*

### Agreement and Reference

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**BASIC RULE 1:** Many grammatical errors result from failing to make different parts of a sentence agree in number, person, or gender. The parts of a sentence must agree in the following ways:

(1) The verb must agree with the subject in number and in person. If the subject is singular, the verb form must also be singular; if the subject is in the third person—*he, she, it*—the verb must also be in the third person.

The chief problem is identifying the true subject of the sentence and determining whether it is singular or plural.

(2) The pronoun must agree with its antecedent (the word to which it refers—sometimes called its *referent*) in number, in person, and in gender. Of the three, gender causes the writer the least difficulty.

The chief problem is identifying the antecedent and determining its number, person, and gender.

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### Subject Problems

The first step in making the parts of a sentence agree is to identify the subject. Certain subjects present special problems.

#### 1. Collective Words

A **collective** names a group of people or things. Although usually singular in form, it is treated as either singular or plural according to the sense of the sentence:

Singular when members of the group act, or are considered as a *unit*:

The junior **class** **is** sponsoring the fund drive.

Plural when the members act, or are considered, individually:

The jury **are** unable to agree on a verdict.

Common collectives include:

assembly, association, audience, board, cabinet, class, commission, committee, company, corporation, council, counsel, couple, crowd, department, family, firm, group, jury, majority, minority, number, pair, press, public, staff, United States

The following short words—though seldom listed as collectives—are governed by the rule for collectives. They are singular or plural according to the intended meaning of the sentence.

all, any, more, most, none, some, who, which

When a prepositional phrase follows the word, the number of the noun in the phrase controls the number of the verb. When no such phrase follows, the writer signals his intended meaning by his choice of the singular or the plural verb.

Some of the **work has been done**.

Some of the **papers have been graded**.

## 2. Units of Measure

When a number is used with a plural noun to indicate a unit of measurement (money, time, fractions, portions, distance, weight, quantity, etc.), a singular verb is used. When the term is thought of as individual parts, a plural verb is used.

**Ten years seems** like a long time.

**Ten years have gone** by since I last saw him.

When fractions and expressions such as *the rest of*, *the remainder of*, *a part of*, *percent of*, etc., are followed by a prepositional phrase, the noun or pronoun in that phrase governs the number of the verb.

**Four-fifths** of the job **was** finished on time.

**Four-fifths** of the letters **were** finished on time.

The **rest** (or **remainder**) of the work **is** due Friday.

The **rest** (or **remainder**) of the papers **are** due Friday.

## 3. Confusing Singular and Plural Forms

It is sometimes hard to tell by its form whether a word is singular or plural. Some words that end in -s may be singular, and some seemingly singular words may be plural.

These words are singular, though they are plural in form:

apparatus, news, summons, whereabouts

The **news is** disturbing.

His **whereabouts has** not yet been determined.

These words are plural, though they are singular (or collective) in meaning:

assets, earnings, means (income), odds, premises, proceeds, quarters, savings, wages, winnings

Her **wages are** earmarked for college expenses.

The **odds are** against our finishing on time.

These words may be either singular or plural, depending on their meaning, even though they are plural in form:

ethics, goods, gross, headquarters, mechanics, politics, series, species, statistics, tactics

**Statistics is** the only course I failed in school.

The **statistics prove** that I am right.

These nouns are plural, though they may appear to be singular because they have foreign or unusual plural forms.

The **analyses have** been completed. (*Analyses* is the plural of *analysis*.)

His conclusion seems sound, but his **criteria are** not valid. (*Criteria* is the plural of *criterion*.)

#### 4. Indefinite Pronouns

These indefinite pronouns are singular. When they are used as subjects, they require singular verbs; when used as antecedents, they require singular pronouns.

anybody, anyone, any one (any one of a group), anything, each, either, every, everybody, everyone, every one (every one of a group), everything, neither, nobody, no one, nothing, one, somebody, someone, some one (some one of a group), something

**Anyone is** welcome, as long as **he** (not **they**) behaves **himself**.

**Each of us is** obliged to sign **his** own name.

**Either** of the alternatives **is** suitable.

**Everyone** must buy **his** book for the course.

Even when two indefinite pronouns are joined by *and*, they remain singular in meaning.

**Anyone** and **everyone is** invited.

**Nothing** and **no one escapes** her attention.

*Many a* (unlike *many*) is singular in meaning and takes a singular verb and pronoun.

**Many a** new student **feels** insecure during **his** first few weeks at school.

*But:* **Many students feel** insecure during **their** first few weeks at school.

*More than one*, though its meaning is plural, is used in the singular.

**More than one** vacation plan **was** changed because of the new requirement.

These words are plural:

both, few, many, several, others

**Both of us have received** new assignments.

**Few will be able** to finish **their** work on time.

**Many plan** to work all weekend.

#### 5. Relative Pronouns

The verb in a relative clause must agree in number and in person with the relative pronoun (*who, which, that, what*) serving as the subject of the clause. The relative pronoun, in turn, must agree with its antecedent. Therefore, before we can make the verb agree with the relative pronoun, we must find the antecedent and determine its person and number.

Have you talked with the man **who was** waiting to see you?  
(*Man* is the antecedent of the relative pronoun *who*, and the verb *was* must agree with this antecedent in person and number.)

Where are the books **that were** left on the table? (The verb in the relative clause—*were*—must agree with the relative pronoun—*that*—which must agree with its antecedent—*books*.)

In sentences that contain the phrases *one of the* or *one of those*, the antecedent of the relative pronoun is not one, but the plural words that follow.

One of the letters **that were** on my desk has disappeared.  
Here is one of those students **who are** applying for the position.

## 6. Subjects Joined by And

When two or more subjects are joined by *and*, whether the subjects are singular or plural, they form a compound subject, which is considered plural.

The **date and the time** of the meeting **have** not been decided.

Phrases or clauses serving as subjects follow the same rule: When two or more phrases or clauses serving as the subject of a sentence are joined by *and*, the resulting compound subject is considered plural.

**Rising early in the morning and taking a walk before breakfast**  
**make** a person feel invigorated all day.

**Exception:** When the subjects joined by *and* refer to the same person or object or represent a single idea, the whole subject is considered singular.

**Ham and eggs** **is** the traditional American breakfast.  
The **growth and development** of our country **is** described in this book.

The article or personal pronoun used before each member of the compound subject indicates whether we see the subject as a single idea or as different ideas.

**My teacher and friend** **helps** me with my problems. (one person)  
**My teacher and my friend** **help** me with my problems. (two people)

## 7. Subjects Joined by Or or Nor

When singular subjects are joined by *or* or *nor*, the subject is considered singular.

Neither the **principal nor** the **assistant principal** **knows** that **he**  
**is** scheduled to attend the meeting.

**One or** the **other** of us **has** to go.

When one singular and plural subject are joined by *or* or *nor*, the subject closer to the verb determines the number of the verb.

Neither the student nor the **teachers** **were** able to attend.  
Neither the teachers nor the **student** **was** able to attend.

**Caution!** Avoid shifts in number or person.

Once you establish a word as either singular or plural, keep it the same throughout the sentence. Be sure that all verbs and all pronouns referring to that word agree with it in number.

*Not:* A **person needs** someone to turn to when **they are** in trouble.

*But:* A **person needs** someone to turn to when **he is** in trouble.

**Be consistent.** If you decide that a collective is singular, keep it singular throughout the sentence—use a singular verb to agree with it and a singular pronoun to refer to it.

If you establish the collective as plural, see that both the verb and the pronoun are plural.

The committee **has** announced **its** decision.

The committee **have** adjourned and gone to **their** homes.

Most indefinite pronouns are singular and require singular verbs and pronouns.

*Not:* **Has anyone** turned in **their** report? (The indefinite pronoun *anyone* takes both a singular verb and a singular pronoun.)

*But:* **Has anyone** turned in **his** report?

Do not apply a verb form from one part of the sentence to another (elliptically) unless the same form is grammatically correct in both parts.

*Not:* The **statistics were** checked and the report filed.

*But:* The **statistics were** checked and the **report was** filed.

Avoid shifting the person of pronouns referring to the same antecedent.

*Not:* **As the ship** entered **her** berth, **its** huge gray shadow seemed to swallow us.

*But:* **As the ship** entered **its** berth, **its** huge gray shadow seemed to swallow us.

*or:* **As the ship** entered **her** berth, **her** huge gray shadow seemed to swallow us.

---

## Structure Problems

Usually it is easy for us to identify the subject or antecedent and determine its number and person. But occasionally a puzzling sentence comes along. The subject is there, but something in the structure of the sentence tries to make us believe that another word is the subject.

### Verb Precedes Subject

When the verb precedes the subject in the sentence (either in a question or in a declarative sentence), locate the true subject and make the verb agree with it.

**Are the file cabinet and the bookcase** in this room?

Clearly visible on the desk **were** the **papers** he had asked us to file.

From these books **come some** of our best **ideas**.

*Where, here, and there*, when introducing a sentence, do not influence the number or person of the verb. In such sentences, find the real subject and make the verb agree with it.

Where **are** the individual **sessions** to be held?  
 Where **is** the meeting **room**?  
 There **are** two **books** on the table.  
 There **is** a **book** on the table.

*What, who, which*, the interrogative pronouns, do not affect the number of the verb. Again, find the subject of the sentence and make the verb agree with it.

What **is** the **status** of the scholarship fund drive?  
 What **are** your **recommendations** on this problem?  
 Who **is** going to accompany you to the meeting?  
 Who, in this group, **are members** of your committee?  
 Which **is** the **memo** that he means?  
 Which **are** the **standards** that we are to apply?

The expletive *it* or *there* introduces the verb and stands for the real subject, which comes later in the clause. The expletive *it* requires a singular verb, even when the real subject is plural. Following the expletive *there*, the verb is singular or plural according to the subject which follows it.

It **is** **solutions** we are looking for, not problems.  
 It **is** doubtful that he will start today.  
 There **are** enclosed five copies of the pamphlet you requested.

### Words Intervene between Subject and Verb

The presence of explanatory or parenthetical phrases, or other modifiers, between the subject and verb does not change the number or person of the subject. Locate the real subject of the sentence and make the verb agree with it.

The **amount** shown, plus interest, **is** due within 30 days.  
 The **letter** with its several attachments **was** received this morning.  
 Our **letters**, like our speech, **are** indications of our knowledge of English.  
**No one** but those present **knows** of this information.

### Subject and Predicate Differ in Number

After forms of the verb *to be* we often find a construction (called the *predicate nominative*) which means the same thing as the subject. When the predicate nominative differs in number from the subject, the verb must agree with the element that precedes it (the subject).

Our main **problem is** keeping up with the reading and handing in our reports on time.  
 Keeping up with the reading and handing in our reports on time **are** our main problem.

### Construction Shift and Parallelism

Use the same grammatical construction for each of the words or ideas in a



sentence if these words or ideas require balance, according to the meaning which the sentence is carrying.

*Not:* **Singing** and **to dance** are not permitted here.

*But:* **Singing** and **dancing** (or **To sing** and **to dance**) are not permitted here.

*Not:* This term, the children are learning the value of **courtesy** and **being kind**.

*But:* This term, the children are learning the value of **courtesy** and **kindness**.

---

## Special Problems of Pronoun Reference

### Ambiguous Antecedents

Do not use forms of the same pronoun to refer to different antecedents.

*Not:* The teacher told John that **he** thought **his** work was improving. (Does the teacher think that his own work is improving, or that John's work is improving?)

*But:* John was told by **his** teacher that **his** work was improving.

Place the pronoun as close as possible to its antecedent to avoid ambiguity or confusion.

*Not:* The letter is on the desk **that** we received yesterday.

*But:* The **letter that** we received yesterday is on the desk.

### Indefinite Antecedents

Be sure that the reference to an antecedent is quite specific.

*Not:* When you have finished the book and written your summary, please return **it** to the library. (What are you returning? The book or the summary?)

*But:* When you have finished the book and written your summary, please return **the book** to the library.

### Implied Antecedents

As a general rule, the antecedent of a pronoun must appear in the sentence—not merely be implied. And the antecedent should be a specific word, not an idea expressed in a phrase or clause. *It, which, this, and that* are the pronouns that most often lead our meaning astray. Any of these pronouns may refer to an idea expressed in a preceding passage if the idea and the reference are *unmistakably* clear. But too often the idea that is unmistakably clear to the speaker or writer is nowhere to be found when the listener or reader looks for it.

*Not:* Although the doctor operated at once, **it** was not a success and the patient died.

*But:* Although the doctor performed the **operation** at once, **it** was not a success and the patient died.

*or:* Although the doctor operated at once, the **operation** was not a success and the patient died.