

EDITING ESSENTIALS: 30 PSLE GRAMMAR PITFALLS & HOW TO FIX THEM

A Comprehensive Guide for PSLE English Success

Master the most common grammar mistakes and achieve excellence in your PSLE English examination

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Introduction

The Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) English paper demands precision in grammar usage. Students often lose valuable marks not because they lack understanding of the content, but because they fall into common grammatical traps. This comprehensive guide identifies the 30 most frequent grammar pitfalls encountered in PSLE English examinations and provides clear strategies to avoid them.

Grammar forms the foundation of effective communication in English. Whether you are tackling the editing section, writing compositions, or answering comprehension questions, a solid grasp of grammatical rules will significantly enhance your performance. Each pitfall in this guide is presented with clear explanations, common mistake examples, correct versions, and practical tips to help you master these challenging areas.

Remember that grammar mastery requires consistent practice and application. Use this guide as your reference companion, and work through each pitfall systematically. With dedication and the right strategies, you can transform these common mistakes into opportunities for excellence.

Part 1: Subject-Verb Agreement

Pitfall 1: Singular Subject with Plural Verb

The Problem:

Students often confuse singular subjects with plural verbs, especially when additional words appear between them.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *The dog bark loudly every morning.*
- ✗ *Each of the students have completed their homework.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *The dog barks loudly every morning.*
- ✓ *Each of the students has completed their homework.*

Quick Tip: Identify the main subject first, ignoring prepositional phrases or additional information. Singular subjects always take singular verbs.

Pitfall 2: Indefinite Pronouns Agreement

The Problem:

Indefinite pronouns like everyone, somebody, anybody, and nobody are always singular, but students often treat them as plural.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *Everyone are ready for the examination.*
- ✗ *Nobody were present at the meeting.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *Everyone is ready for the examination.*
- ✓ *Nobody was present at the meeting.*

Quick Tip: Remember that indefinite pronouns ending in -one, -body, or -thing are always singular: everyone, somebody, anything, nothing.

Pitfall 3: Phrases Between Subject and Verb

The Problem:

When additional phrases appear between the subject and verb, students often match the verb to the nearest noun instead of the actual subject.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *The collection of rare stamps are valuable.*
- ✗ *Anna, together with her friends, are going to the party.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *The collection of rare stamps is valuable.*
- ✓ *Anna, together with her friends, is going to the party.*

Quick Tip: Cross out phrases set off by commas or prepositional phrases to identify the true subject. Phrases like "together with", "along with", "as well as" don't change the subject.

Pitfall 4: Neither/Nor and Either/Or Confusion

The Problem:

When using correlative conjunctions, students struggle with the proximity rule for verb agreement.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *Neither the teacher nor the students was prepared.*
- ✗ *Either the cats or the dog are sleeping.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *Neither the teacher nor the students were prepared.*
- ✓ *Either the cats or the dog is sleeping.*

Quick Tip: With neither/nor and either/or, the verb agrees with the subject closest to it. If one subject is singular and one is plural, place the plural subject second.

Pitfall 5: Collective Nouns Agreement

The Problem:

Collective nouns can be treated as singular or plural depending on context, causing confusion for students.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *The team are arguing amongst themselves.*
- ✗ *The family were having dinner together.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *The team is arguing amongst themselves. (team as unit)*
- ✓ *The family was having dinner together. (family as unit)*

Quick Tip: In British English, collective nouns are usually treated as singular when acting as a unit. Common collective nouns include team, family, class, group, committee.

Pitfall 6: Long Noun Phrases as Subjects

The Problem:

When the subject is a long phrase beginning with a gerund, students may lose track of the actual subject.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *Reading a collection of adventure books are my favourite hobby.*
- ✗ *Playing video games with friends are fun.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *Reading a collection of adventure books is my favourite hobby.*
- ✓ *Playing video games with friends is fun.*

Quick Tip: Gerund phrases (verb + -ing as subject) are always singular. Focus on the gerund itself, not the objects within the phrase.

Part 2: Tense Errors

Pitfall 7: Present and Past Tense Confusion

The Problem:

Students mix present and past tenses within the same context or fail to maintain tense consistency throughout a passage.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *Yesterday, I go to the library and borrowed three books.*
- ✗ *She walked to school every day and meets her friends.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *Yesterday, I went to the library and borrowed three books.*
- ✓ *She walks to school every day and meets her friends.*

Quick Tip: Look for time indicators (yesterday, now, every day, last week) to determine the correct tense. Maintain consistency unless there's a clear shift in time.

Pitfall 8: Perfect Tense Misuse

The Problem:

Students struggle with when to use present perfect (have/has + past participle) versus simple past tense.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *I have seen that film yesterday.*
- ✗ *She already finished her homework when I called.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *I saw that film yesterday.*
- ✓ *She had already finished her homework when I called.*

Quick Tip: Use present perfect for experiences or actions without specific time. Use past perfect to show which of two past actions happened first.

Pitfall 9: Tense Consistency Errors

The Problem:

Students change tenses unnecessarily within a passage, particularly when describing habitual actions or ongoing situations.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *The town was peaceful. People walk slowly and children played in the parks.*
- ✗ *She studies hard for her exams and practiced piano yesterday.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *The town is peaceful. People walk slowly and children play in the parks.*
- ✓ *She studied hard for her exams and practised piano yesterday.*

Quick Tip: Stick to one tense unless there's a clear reason to change. When describing general truths or current situations, use present tense consistently.

Pitfall 10: Present Participle Mistakes

The Problem:

Students incorrectly use present participles (-ing forms) where other verb forms are required.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *He enjoys to reading adventure novels.*
- ✗ *The cow milking in the barn belongs to the farmer.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *He enjoys reading adventure novels.*
- ✓ *The cow being milked in the barn belongs to the farmer.*

Quick Tip: Present participles follow certain verbs (enjoy, avoid, consider) and can describe ongoing actions. Check whether the -ing form fits the sentence structure.

Pitfall 11: Past Participle Errors

The Problem:

Students use incorrect past participle forms, especially with irregular verbs, or use them in wrong contexts.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *The message was wrote in pencil.*
- ✗ *They have swam in the pool all morning.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *The message was written in pencil.*
- ✓ *They have swum in the pool all morning.*

Quick Tip: Learn irregular past participles: written, swum, eaten, broken, chosen. Past participles are used with have/has/had and in passive voice.

Pitfall 12: Future Tense Formation

The Problem:

Students incorrectly form future tenses or mix future forms inappropriately.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *I will going to the cinema tomorrow.*
- ✗ *She is going to will help us with the project.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *I will go to the cinema tomorrow.*
- ✓ *She is going to help us with the project.*

Quick Tip: Use either "will + base verb" or "going to + base verb" for future actions, but don't combine them. Choose based on certainty and planning.

Part 3: Pronoun Problems

Pitfall 13: Who vs Whom Confusion

The Problem:

Students struggle to determine when to use "who" (subject) versus "whom" (object) in questions and relative clauses.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *Who did you give the book to?*
- ✗ *The person whom helped me was very kind.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *Whom did you give the book to? (or: To whom did you give the book?)*
- ✓ *The person who helped me was very kind.*

Quick Tip: Replace with he/him. If "him" fits, use "whom". If "he" fits, use "who".
"Who" performs actions; "whom" receives them.

Pitfall 14: Pronoun-Antecedent Disagreement

The Problem:

Pronouns must agree in number and gender with the nouns they replace, but students often make mismatches.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *Each student must bring his or her books with him.*
- ✗ *The pictures showed it clearly to the editor.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *Each student must bring his or her books with him or her.*
- ✓ *The pictures showed them clearly to the editor.*

Quick Tip: Identify what noun the pronoun replaces. Make sure they match in number (singular/plural) and refer to the same entity.

Pitfall 15: Reflexive Pronoun Errors

The Problem:

Students misuse reflexive pronouns (myself, himself, herself, itself, ourselves, themselves) or use them incorrectly.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *The dog hurt himself when it fell.*
- ✗ *Please contact John or myself if you need help.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *The dog hurt itself when it fell.*
- ✓ *Please contact John or me if you need help.*

Quick Tip: Reflexive pronouns must refer back to the subject of the sentence. Use "me" instead of "myself" when you're not the subject performing the action on yourself.

Pitfall 16: Demonstrative Pronoun Mistakes

The Problem:

Students confuse singular (this, that) and plural (these, those) demonstrative pronouns.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *This modern technological advancements have changed our lives.*
- ✗ *That apples are delicious.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *These modern technological advancements have changed our lives.*
- ✓ *Those apples are delicious.*

Quick Tip: "This" and "that" are singular; "these" and "those" are plural. Match them with singular or plural nouns accordingly.

Pitfall 17: Possessive Pronoun Confusion

The Problem:

Students confuse possessive pronouns (its, theirs, yours) with contractions (it's, they're, you're).

Common Mistake:

 *The dog wagged it's tail happily.*

 *The books are their's, not ours.*

Correct Version:

 *The dog wagged its tail happily.*

 *The books are theirs, not ours.*

Quick Tip: Possessive pronouns never have apostrophes. If you can replace it with "it is" or "they are", then use the contraction with apostrophe.

Part 4: Preposition Pitfalls

Pitfall 18: Wrong Preposition Choice

The Problem:

Students choose incorrect prepositions for time, place, and direction, especially with similar-sounding phrases.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *I will meet you in Monday morning.*
- ✗ *She is good in mathematics.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *I will meet you on Monday morning.*
- ✓ *She is good at mathematics.*

Quick Tip: Use "on" for days and dates, "in" for months and years, "at" for specific times. Learn fixed phrases: good at, interested in, afraid of.

Pitfall 19: Dependent Preposition Errors

The Problem:

Certain verbs, adjectives, and nouns require specific prepositions that students often get wrong.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *She is married with a doctor.*
- ✗ *I am looking forward for your reply.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *She is married to a doctor.*
- ✓ *I am looking forward to your reply.*

Quick Tip: Memorise common verb-preposition combinations: depend on, consist of, conform to, care for, worry about, excited about.

Pitfall 20: Preposition Omission

The Problem:

Students sometimes omit necessary prepositions, creating incomplete or incorrect sentences.

Common Mistake:

✗ *She arrived the station at 3 pm.*

✗ *I am thinking my holidays.*

Correct Version:

✓ *She arrived at the station at 3 pm.*

✓ *I am thinking about my holidays.*

Quick Tip: Some verbs always need prepositions: arrive at/in, think about, listen to, wait for. Read sentences aloud to catch missing prepositions.

Pitfall 21: Redundant Prepositions

The Problem:

Students add unnecessary prepositions where they don't belong, creating wordy or incorrect constructions.

Common Mistake:

✗ *Where are you going to?*

✗ *I cannot remember of what happened.*

Correct Version:

✓ *Where are you going?*

✓ *I cannot remember what happened.*

Quick Tip: Some verbs don't need prepositions: discuss (not discuss about), enter (not enter into), remember (not remember of).

Part 5: Article Mistakes

Pitfall 22: A vs An Confusion

The Problem:

Students choose articles based on spelling rather than pronunciation, leading to errors with vowel and consonant sounds.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *She is a honest person.*
- ✗ *He received an university degree.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *She is an honest person.*
- ✓ *He received a university degree.*

Quick Tip: Use "an" before vowel sounds (honest starts with /ɒ/), not vowel letters. Use "a" before consonant sounds (university starts with /ju:/).

Pitfall 23: Missing Articles

The Problem:

Students omit necessary articles before singular countable nouns or in fixed expressions.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *I need pencil for the examination.*
- ✗ *She plays piano beautifully.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *I need a pencil for the examination.*
- ✓ *She plays the piano beautifully.*

Quick Tip: Singular countable nouns almost always need an article. Musical instruments take "the": play the violin, the guitar, the drums.

Pitfall 24: Unnecessary Article Usage

The Problem:

Students add articles where they shouldn't be used, particularly with abstract nouns, plural generalisations, or proper nouns.

Common Mistake:

✗ *The honesty is the best policy.*

✗ *I love the chocolate ice cream.*

Correct Version:

✓ *Honesty is the best policy.*

✓ *I love chocolate ice cream.*

Quick Tip: Don't use articles with abstract nouns in general statements, uncountable nouns, or when making generalisations about categories.

Part 6: Punctuation Problems

Pitfall 25: Comma Splice Errors

The Problem:

Students incorrectly join two independent clauses with only a comma, creating run-on sentences.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *The weather was terrible, we decided to stay home.*
- ✗ *She studied hard, she passed her exams.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *The weather was terrible, so we decided to stay home.*
- ✓ *She studied hard; she passed her exams.*

Quick Tip: Join independent clauses with coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or, so) after the comma, or use a semicolon, or make them separate sentences.

Pitfall 26: Apostrophe Misuse

The Problem:

Students confuse possessive apostrophes with contractions or add apostrophes to plural nouns unnecessarily.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *The cat's are sleeping in the garden.*
- ✗ *Its a beautiful day for the children's party.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *The cats are sleeping in the garden.*
- ✓ *It's a beautiful day for the children's party.*

Quick Tip: Use apostrophes for possession (cat's toy) and contractions (it's = it is). Don't use them for simple plurals. "Its" (possessive) vs "it's" (it is).

Pitfall 27: Missing Punctuation Marks

The Problem:

Students omit necessary punctuation marks, particularly commas in lists, before quotations, or after introductory elements.

Common Mistake:

✗ *After finishing her homework Sarah went to bed.*

✗ *She bought apples oranges and bananas.*

Correct Version:

✓ *After finishing her homework, Sarah went to bed.*

✓ *She bought apples, oranges, and bananas.*

Quick Tip: Use commas after introductory phrases, in lists, and to separate clauses. Read your sentence aloud to hear natural pauses.

Part 7: Sentence Structure Issues

Pitfall 28: Sentence Fragments

The Problem:

Students write incomplete sentences that lack either a subject or a complete predicate, often starting with subordinating conjunctions.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *Because she was tired after the long journey.*
- ✗ *Running quickly to catch the bus.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *Because she was tired after the long journey, she went to bed early.*
- ✓ *She was running quickly to catch the bus.*

Quick Tip: Every sentence needs a subject and a complete verb. Subordinating conjunctions (because, although, since) create dependent clauses that need main clauses.

Pitfall 29: Dangling Modifiers

The Problem:

Students place modifying phrases at the beginning of sentences without ensuring they clearly relate to the correct subject.

Common Mistake:

- ✗ *Walking down the street, the flowers smelled wonderful.*
- ✗ *To be excused from class, a medical certificate is required.*

Correct Version:

- ✓ *Walking down the street, I noticed the flowers smelled wonderful.*
- ✓ *To be excused from class, students must present a medical certificate.*

Quick Tip: The subject immediately following a modifying phrase must be the one performing the action described in the modifier.

Pitfall 30: Run-on Sentences

The Problem:

Students create overly long sentences by joining too many independent clauses without proper punctuation or conjunctions.

Common Mistake:

✗ *I woke up early this morning I had breakfast I brushed my teeth I went to school I met my friends we played football.*

✗ *The book was interesting I read it in one day I want to read more books by the same author.*

Correct Version:

✓ *I woke up early this morning. After having breakfast and brushing my teeth, I went to school where I met my friends, and we played football.*

✓ *The book was so interesting that I read it in one day. I want to read more books by the same author.*

Quick Tip: Break long sentences into shorter ones. Use coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions, or semicolons to connect related ideas properly.

Final Review and Practice Strategy

Key Principles for PSLE Grammar Success

- 1. Read Systematically:** In editing sections, read the passage completely first, then examine each line carefully for potential errors. Don't rush to find mistakes without understanding the context.
- 2. Focus on Common Patterns:** The 30 pitfalls in this guide represent the most frequently tested grammar points. Prioritise mastering these before moving to more advanced concepts.
- 3. Practice Recognition:** Train yourself to spot these errors in your own writing and in practice materials. Recognition is the first step to correction.
- 4. Apply the Rules:** Understanding rules is not enough; you must apply them consistently in your writing across all components of the English paper.
- 5. Read Aloud:** Many errors can be caught by reading sentences aloud. If something sounds wrong, investigate further.

Revision Checklist

Use this checklist when reviewing your writing or tackling editing questions:

- ✓ Subject-verb agreement (singular/plural match)
- ✓ Tense consistency and correct forms
- ✓ Pronoun clarity and agreement
- ✓ Correct preposition usage
- ✓ Appropriate article selection
- ✓ Proper punctuation placement
- ✓ Complete sentence structure
- ✓ Clear modifier placement
- ✓ Appropriate sentence length
- ✓ Correct word forms (participles, etc.)

Moving Forward

Grammar mastery is a gradual process that requires consistent practice and application. Use this guide as your reference tool, but remember that reading extensively and practising regularly are equally important for developing your language skills.

Each time you write, whether in composition, situational writing, or even note-taking, apply these principles. The goal is to internalise these grammar rules so that correct usage becomes automatic.

Remember that grammar serves communication. While accuracy is important for PSLE success, the ultimate purpose of mastering these rules is to express your ideas clearly and effectively. With

the foundation provided in this guide and dedicated practice, you will develop the confidence and competence needed to excel in your PSLE English examination.

Best of luck with your PSLE English examination!