

20 GRAMMAR RULES SELECTIVE MARKERS ACTUALLY CARE ABOUT

A cheat sheet with only the rules that really
cost marks

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1

Every sentence must be a complete idea (no fragments)

Rule: A sentence needs a subject (who/what) + verb (what they do/are) + a complete thought.

✗ Running down the corridor.

✓ I was running down the corridor.

✗ Because I was late.

✓ I panicked because I was late.

A fragment is an incomplete sentence that doesn't express a complete thought. It may be missing a subject, verb, or both. In exam writing, fragments make your work appear rushed and unpolished, costing valuable marks.

2 Avoid "run-on" sentences

Rule: Don't glue lots of ideas together with "and/then/so" and no proper break.

✗ We walked into the hall and the teacher gave out the papers and everyone was noisy and I felt scared and my hands were shaking.

✓ We walked into the hall and the teacher gave out the papers. Everyone was noisy, and I felt scared. My hands were shaking.

Fix:

- Add a full stop, or
- Use and/but/so once, not five times in a row.

3

Capital letters at the start and for proper nouns

Rule:

- Start every sentence with a capital.
- Use capitals for names of people, places, languages, subjects.

✓ Yesterday we went to Sydney for a Science excursion.

✓ My cousin speaks Chinese at home.

Proper capitalization shows attention to detail and respect for standard conventions. Missing capitals on proper nouns or sentence beginnings immediately signals careless writing to markers.



End every sentence with the right punctuation

Rule: Every sentence ends with . ? !

- Statement → .
- Question → ?
- Strong feeling / shout → ! (use sparingly in exams)

✗ Do you think this is fair.

✓ Do you think this is fair?

Missing or incorrect end punctuation makes sentences run into each other, creating confusion for the reader and demonstrating poor sentence boundary awareness.

5 Keep your tense consistent inside a paragraph

Rule: Choose past or present and stick to it, especially in narratives.

✗ Yesterday I walk into the hall and see the exam paper and I was scared.

✓ Yesterday I walked into the hall and saw the exam paper and I was scared.

Exam-safe default for stories: past tense (walked, saw, felt, said).

Inconsistent tense shifts confuse readers and suggest the writer lacks control over their narrative voice. Stick to one tense throughout each paragraph unless there's a clear reason to change.

6

Match the verb to the subject (subject-verb agreement)

Rule:

- He / she / it / the student → does, has, is, was, walks
- They / we / I / the students → do, have, are, were, walk

✗ He don't like maths. → ✓ He does not like maths.

✗ They was late. → ✓ They were late.

✗ The students walks home. → ✓ The students walk home.

Subject-verb disagreement is one of the most noticeable grammar errors and immediately suggests weak command of basic English structure.

7

Use pronouns so it's always clear who "he / she / they / it" is

Rule: A pronoun must clearly refer to one noun you just mentioned.

✗ Tom spoke to Max about the exam and he was worried.
(Who was worried?)

✓ Tom spoke to Max about the exam, and Max was worried.

✓ Tom spoke to Max about the exam, and he realised Max was worried.

If a marker has to stop and ask "who?", your grammar costs marks. Clear pronoun reference keeps your writing flowing smoothly and demonstrates sophisticated sentence control.

8

Use apostrophes for possession, not for every plural

Rule:

- Plural (more than one) → no apostrophe: students, teachers, books
- Possession (something belongs to someone) → apostrophe: the student's book, the students' books

✗ The student's are lining up. (No one owns anything here → no apostrophe)

✓ The students are lining up.

✓ I found my friend's pencil.

✓ I cleaned the teachers' staffroom.

9 Know the difference: its vs it's

Rule:

- it's = it is or it has
- its = belongs to it

Test: If you can replace the word with "it is" or "it has", use it's.

- ✓ It's raining. (= It is)
- ✓ It's been a long day. (= It has)
- ✓ The dog wagged its tail. (tail belongs to the dog; "it is tail" ✗)

10

Know the difference: their / there / they're

Rule:

- there = place or "there is/are"
- their = belongs to them
- they're = they are

- ✓ Put your bag over there.
- ✓ The students forgot their books.
- ✓ They're excited about the exam. (= They are)

11 Know the difference: your / you're

Rule:

- your = belongs to you
- you're = you are

✓ Is this your pencil?

✓ You're going to do your best. (= You are)

Test: If you can't swap it for "you are", don't use you're.

Use commas correctly in lists and between ideas

Rule:

- Use commas to separate items in a list.
- Do not use a comma instead of a full stop between two full sentences.

✓ We packed pencils, rulers, snacks and water.

✗ The bell rang, we rushed outside.

✓ The bell rang, and we rushed outside.

✓ The bell rang. We rushed outside.

13

Start a new paragraph for a new idea, time or speaker

Rule:

- New idea → new paragraph
- New time / place → new paragraph
- New speaker in dialogue → new line

This isn't just "style". Dense, unbroken blocks of text are hard to mark and look less controlled.

✓ Each paragraph should have a clear focus:

- one event
- one part of the argument
- one main feeling

14 Punctuate dialogue properly

Rule (basic exam-safe version):

- Put " " around what is said.
- Use a comma before the closing quotation mark if the speech tag follows.

- ✓ "I'm not ready for this," I whispered.
- ✓ She looked at me and said, "You'll be fine."
- ✓ "Are you serious?" my friend asked.

Avoid long, chaotic conversations – a few well-punctuated lines of speech is enough.

15

Avoid switching person for no reason

Rule: Pick a person and stay with it, especially in persuasive writing.

✗ I believe homework should be limited because you get tired and we cannot focus.

✓ I believe homework should be limited because students get tired and they cannot focus.

✓ Students get tired and they cannot focus when homework is excessive.

16 Don't use double negatives

Rule: Two negatives make the sentence confusing.

✗ I don't have no time.

✓ I don't have any time.

✓ I have no time.

✗ We can't do nothing about this.

✓ We can't do anything about this.

✓ We can do nothing about this.

17

Use comparative and superlative forms correctly

Rule:

- Comparing two things → -er / more: better, stronger, more interesting
- Comparing three or more → -est / most: best, strongest, most interesting

✗ This was the most better result I ever had.

✓ This was the best result I ever had.

✗ My mark was more higher than before.

✓ My mark was higher than before.

18

Use formal language in exams (limit slang & chat-speak)

Not strictly "grammar", but it affects how markers see control.

Rule:

- Avoid: gonna, wanna, kinda, btw, lol, u, cuz in exam writing.
- Use full forms: going to, want to, kind of, because.

✗ I was like, "This test is gonna be so bad lol."

✓ I thought the test was going to be extremely difficult.

Contractions (don't, can't, won't) are not "wrong", but fewer and more formal is safer in high-stakes persuasive pieces.

19

Be careful with common homophones

Rule:

- then = time; than = comparison
- affect (verb) vs effect (usually noun)

- ✓ First we entered the hall, then we sat down.
- ✓ My score was higher than last time.
- ✓ Lack of sleep can affect concentration.
- ✓ One effect of lack of sleep is poor concentration.

These errors make otherwise strong writing look careless.

Keep pronouns and nouns consistent in number and gender

Rule:

- If your noun is singular, the pronoun must be singular.
- If you choose they as a singular (which is acceptable), use it consistently.

✗ Every student must bring their pencil; he should put it on the desk.

✓ Every student must bring their pencil; they should put it on the desk.

✓ Every student must bring his or her pencil; he or she should put it on the desk.

How to Turn This Cheat Sheet into Practice

(for parents & students)

1. Print this page and keep it next to the writing book.
2. After each timed piece, choose 3 rules from the list and quickly check the script only for those.
3. Circle repeated mistakes and write one clear target at the top of the next draft:

"Next piece: watch tense (Rule 5), its/it's (Rule 9), and apostrophes (Rule 8)."

Key Strategy:

By focusing on these 20 rules – not every rule in the language – students clean up most of the errors that actually cost marks in selective and scholarship writing.

Additional Tips:

- Focus on 2-3 rules per writing session rather than trying to remember all 20
- Keep a personal "error log" of which rules you break most often
- Practice these rules in low-stakes writing before applying them in timed conditions
- Read your work aloud – many grammar errors become obvious when you hear them

- Remember: these rules matter most in formal exam writing, not casual communication