

# How can we simplify grammar?

Some linguists, writers or editors, and English teachers enjoy arguing over spoken or written style—which sentence construction sounds the most sophisticated or the most original or interesting, etc. Nevertheless, the fact remains: for new readers and learners of English as a second language, some kinds of grammar are easier to understand than others. Assuming that the purpose of adapting discourse is to make it more “transparent,” we should choose structures recipients can understand without analysis or translation.

In the left column of the following grammar chart are constructions that language learners may find problematic. They include sentence examples. In the right column are paraphrases of the same ideas—with more “basic” sentence grammar. Many changes are underlined.

<i>Features of “Difficult” Sentence Structure<sup>1</sup></i>	Features of Simpler Sentence Grammar
<p><b>Long sentences with many extra words or phrases, usually modifiers. EXAMPLES:</b></p> <p><i>Soaring dropout rates (averaging between 40 and 50 percent since the 1950s) coupled with high percentages of functional illiteracy indicate that <u>current educational practices have not had the intended academic benefits.</u><sup>1</sup></i></p>	<p><b>Short sentences with few qualifiers. Questions followed by answers. EXAMPLES:</b></p> <p><u>More and more students are dropping out of school.</u></p> <p><u>Many are functionally illiterate. What does this mean? That current educational practices aren't working.</u></p>

<sup>1</sup> These sentences are from an article “Teaching Bilingual Students Successfully,” by Watson, Northcutt, and Rydell, in *Educational Leadership* (February 1989).

## Features of “Difficult” Sentence Structure

**Complete, correct, formal sentences only. EXAMPLES:**

Traditional teaching strategies do not provide youth that have limited English proficiency the opportunities to master English and learn the academic content of the lesson.

**Multi-clause sentences, with sophisticated connecting devices. EXAMPLES:**

In spite of the fact that some educators believe “sheltered English” is a “watering down” of course content that instructors are required to teach, it has proven effective when a class includes a large number of learners who have not had previous, extensive formal education in the English language.

**The passive voice: SUBJECT + VERB (+ AGENT) (+ PHRASE). EXAMPLES:**

For lessons to be “sheltered,” language teaching techniques must be incorporated with traditional teaching methodologies so that the comprehensibility of the material is increased.

## More Easily Understood Sentence Grammar

**Occasional sentence fragments— if they sound natural in spoken English. EXAMPLES:**

Why don't traditional teaching strategies work? Because they don't help young people master English. And because they don't make it easy to learn subject matter

**One-clause sentences—or two clauses joined by simple connecting words (and, but, so, because, if, that). EXAMPLES:**

Why do some educators oppose “sheltered English?” Because they believe that it “waters down” course content. This may be partially true, but instructors can still teach what is required with simplified language. And sheltered English works in teaching and learning, so . . .

**The active voice: SUBJECT + VERB (+ OBJECT) (+ PHRASE). EXAMPLES:**

How do teachers use “sheltered English?” They combine language learning techniques with traditional teaching methods. Then the material becomes easier to understand.

## Features of “Difficult” Sentence Structure

**Complex verb-tense phrases, including strings of modals and auxiliaries, like *be, have, had, can, should, will*, + verbs with endings: *-ing, -ed*. EXAMPLES:**

*A teacher who is being confronted by a group of students that haven't had instruction in the fine points of the English language should have been told about the principles of sheltered English.*

**Unusual word order. EXAMPLES:**

*Next come the hard parts. What is most necessary is adjusting the language demands of the lesson by modifying speech rate and tone. Also helpful is the extensive use of context clues.*

**Frequent use of “verbals” such as participial and gerund phrases. EXAMPLES:**

*Relating instruction to students' experience, “sheltered English” teachers put effort into avoiding using idiomatic expressions while shortening sentences by separating ideas.*

## More Easily Understood Sentence Grammar

**The simplest verb-tense forms possible for the meaning, usually the present, past, or future and simple modal-verb phrases.**

**EXAMPLES:**

You have a group of beginners in English. They don't know the fine points of the language. You never studied grammar. Hopefully, someone will tell you some principles of sheltered English.

**The most common word order: In statements, SUBJECT + VERB ( + PLACE ) ( + TIME ) ( + rest of sentence ). EXAMPLES:**

*The hard parts come next. You have to adjust the language of the lesson. You can change your speech rate and tone. Context clues are also helpful.*

**Occasional use of infinitive phrases—after nouns and adjectives and to show purpose. Use of simple prepositional phrases. EXAMPLES:**

*To make instruction understandable, “sheltered English” teachers relate it to students' experience. They try to avoid idioms. They separate ideas to shorten sentences.*

# How can vocabulary be simplified?

For some limited-English learners, it is not only sentence structure that makes speech and reading matter difficult to understand. It's also vocabulary use—phrasing or “phraseology.” In the left column below are kinds of words and expressions that might stump learners. In the right column are examples of vocabulary that is generally easier to understand.

<p><b>“Difficult” Kinds of Vocabulary and Phrasing</b></p>	<p><b>More Easily Understood Word Usage</b></p>
<p><b>Jargon—words and phrases understood only by members of a limited group. EXAMPLES:</b>  <i>A <u>practitioner of the language acquisition methodology of sheltering English through comprehensible input can teach LEP and ESL students.</u></i></p>	<p><b>Words commonly understood by everyone. EXAMPLES:</b>            Can you use simplified English? Then you can teach students with limited language proficiency. You should also be able to teach students of English as a second language.</p>
<p><b>“High-level” vocab, technical words, or literary expressions that sound sophisticated—without definition or explanation. EXAMPLES:</b>  <i>When it becomes <u>advisable for novice acquirers of knowledge to comprehend the relevance of the totality of printed communications, it behooves educators to extract fundamental concepts and further to reproduce in the form of comprehensible input that which is pertinent to the acquisition of wisdom.</u></i></p>	<p><b>Basic words and their most common synonyms, introduced so that the meaning is clear—or explained with simpler words. EXAMPLES:</b>  <i>Beginners need to get the <u>point</u> (the <u>message</u>) of <u>printed matter</u>. <u>Instructors</u> (<u>teachers</u>) should decide which <u>information</u> is most <u>important</u>. Then they should <u>adapt</u> or <u>paraphrase</u> (<u>restate</u> or <u>rewrite</u>) the <u>necessary</u> or <u>interesting</u> or <u>useful parts</u>.</i></p>

## “Difficult” Kinds of Vocabulary and Phrasing

**Idiomatic expressions and current slang. EXAMPLES:**

*Don't beat around the bush in your explanations. Get right to it. You can't be clear as a bell if you can't see the forest for the trees.*

**Words with multiple, unrelated meanings, or words difficult to explain. Words or phrases with no equivalents in learners' native languages or false cognates (words in two languages that look similar but have very different meanings). EXAMPLES:**

*Hypothetically, developmental learners appear engaging; historically, career educators tend to react with sympathy.*

**Ellipsis (words left out) and “pro-forms”—word substitutions. EXAMPLES:**

Some words are more basic than others, so use common phrases rather than literary ones. If you do so, such students as those discussed above will understand more readily than not.

## More Easily Understood Word Usage

**Standard, everyday vocabulary. EXAMPLES:**

Don't be indirect in your explanations. Make your point quickly. To make your meaning clear, state the general message directly.

**Words with only one or a few related meanings. Words with exact equivalents in learners' native languages—or words that can be explained with other words that readers/listeners know. EXAMPLES:**

Hard-working teachers think they should be interested in teaching below-average learners; they've always like to understand and help people.

**Repetition of words or use of basic personal or demonstrative pronouns (he, them, this, etc.)**

**EXAMPLES:**

Some words are more basic than other words. Use common phrases rather than literary phrases. If you repeat vocabulary, limited-English students will understand it.