Writing naturally in English:
Strategies for authors writing in a second language

Organization of information

Structure
- Begin important paragraphs with a topic sentence
- Provide more detail
- Add supporting and contrasting information
- Avoid introducing unrelated points at the end
- In a very important paragraph, link back to the topic sentence to emphasize the topic

Transitions
- Create smooth transitions between sentences
- Link short, choppy sentences together
- Use transition words in key places (but not everywhere)

Patterns to use sparingly
Think carefully before using the following patterns in your writing

As for X	Not only A, but also B	On the other hand,

Common spellchecker errors
Be on the lookout when using the following words, as the spellchecker will often confuse these pairs of similarly spelled words.

angle	angel	every day	everyday
being	begin	form	from
causal	casual	her	here
dairy	diary	imminent	immanent
definite	defiant	manager	manger
desert	dessert	marital	martial
		off	of
		public	pubic
		specimen	spacemen
		world	word
		would	wound

In a previous feature article, we wrote about the important of writing with authority. Here, we'll discuss writing naturally.

A big challenge for authors writing in a second language is that, even when the grammar is correct and the meaning is understandable, the writing can still lack the feel of a native speaker's.

In this article, we'll introduce some writing strategies that academic editors use that can help to make your English sound more natural.

Download a summary sheet of strategies for writing naturally (with added examples)

1) Topic (focus) sentences to organize your information

Although there are many possible ways to structure your information when writing a manuscript, your writing will feel more natural if you use a structure that your audience is familiar with. One approach is the topic-sentence structure, which is widely taught in first-language English classes and is widely used in academic writing. It will therefore be easily recognized by many readers.

In this method, you start with the broad idea and then narrow the focus. Although it may be appropriate to spend time building up to your main focus when writing in other languages or when writing persuasively, natural English writing is typically more direct when the goal is to inform. Therefore, in each paragraph, you should state the main focus in the first sentence—the "topic sentence" or "focus sentence." This will give the reader context and tell them why they should pay attention to this paragraph. The sentences that follow the topic sentence should provide more detail on the same topic, and provide supporting and contrasting evidence about the topic. Native and non-native writers are often taught to provide something "new" at the end of the paragraph to pull the reader forward; however, for informative writing (which we use to report research), you should avoid introducing an unrelated point at the end of a paragraph because it may distract or confuse the reader. In especially important paragraphs, you may even want to include a sentence that links back to the topic sentence to emphasize your argument.

Within your overall paragraph structure, it is also important to have smooth links and transitions between sentences. Sometimes this involves connecting sentences with "and" and "but," and sometimes it involves a logical transition word such as "therefore." Other times it just requires starting a new sentence. Your writing will flow naturally if you use a variety of transitions appropriate for the context. Don't start every sentence with an introductory clause—for example, it would be awkward to start four sentences in a row with "Moreover," "Additionally," "Furthermore," and "Also." However, if you use too few transition words, your writing might seem choppy. Balance is key here.

2) Sentence patterns that should be used sparingly

As for X

The pattern "as for X" is sometimes taught to non-native learners of English as a way to change between topics. However, this pattern can feel very abrupt, or if it is used many times in succession, it can seem ponderous. Usage such as "As for large cities, disease incidence was high, and for smaller towns it was moderate" is often better handled in English by simply stating the facts and using simple conjunctions: "Disease incidence was high in large cities and moderate in smaller towns."

Not only A, but also B

The phrase "not only…, but also…" is often used by non-native speakers to present two items. This pattern creates a very strong contrast between the items because it expresses the nuance that A was expected naturally, but B was not. This meaning may not be appropriate for every circumstance.

For instance, saying "the treatment was effective in not only individuals with disease, but also healthy individuals" implies that the treatment was not expected to have an effect in healthy individuals. This could be true. However, "flu vaccination was effective in not only men, but also women" sounds less natural because without further information the reader would have no reason to expect that men and women would be affected differently by the treatment. Often, "and" is sufficient to communicate the concept: "vaccination was effective in men and women."

On the other hand,

"On the other hand" is one-half of the pair "On (the) one hand, … On the other hand, …." This is used to highlight a contrast between two parallel items. However, non-native speakers often omit the first half of the pair and use "on the other hand" by itself to indicate a contrast between two items, and sometimes use it to transition between sentences.

If you find yourself using "on the other hand" by itself, try to rephrase. "However," "although," or a similar transition can sound more natural.

3) Automated spellcheckers and grammar checkers should be used to guide, not to decide

The spellchecker function of a word processor is a useful tool for all writers, even those writing in their first language. However, in many instances, the spellchecker will fail to catch errors that would be apparent to a native speaker. Worse, it may even occasionally suggest changes that are incorrect. This can happen when using words that serve as both noun and verb. For instance, the following type of mistake is often seen.

Incorrect: "The faculty and staffs of the university extend their thanks to…"

Correct: "The faculty and staff of the university extend their thanks to…"

Here, the noun "staff," in the sense of a group of employees, is an uncountable noun; therefore, the plural is simply "staff." Because this is a common word in English, most native speakers would not make this mistake. However, "staff" is also a verb and can become "staffs" in sentences such as "She staffs the branch office with skilled workers." The word processor cannot distinguish between these distinct correct uses of the word, so it will not alert you to mistakes of this kind. You have to identify these by careful reading.

Likewise, use grammar checkers with care. They can be helpful, but they do not always function correctly.

Helpful comment: When typing the previous example in Word, the grammar checker underlined the word "their" and the comment helpfully reminds us to double-check that we have used the correct word "their" versus the word "they're", which is commonly confused with it.
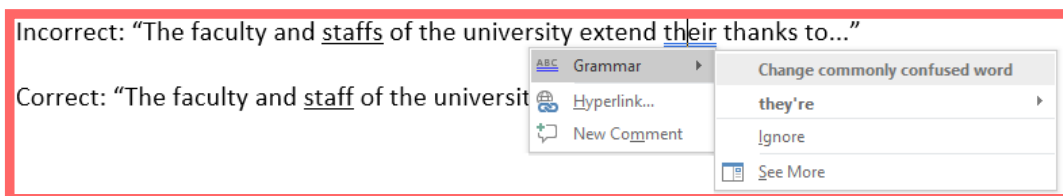
Unnecessary comment: Often grammar checkers over-apply certain writing conventions (which may even be writing myths, as we've discussed previously) to any text written using that word processor, regardless of the type of content. Therefore, the grammar checker may suggest completely unnecessary changes that ignore your voice or target writing style. In the example below, not only is the original text completely appropriate, the phrase "per" is actually less common than "according to" for this style of writing. Although the grammar checker's suggestion is not technically incorrect, the sentence would be less effective if you accepted it.
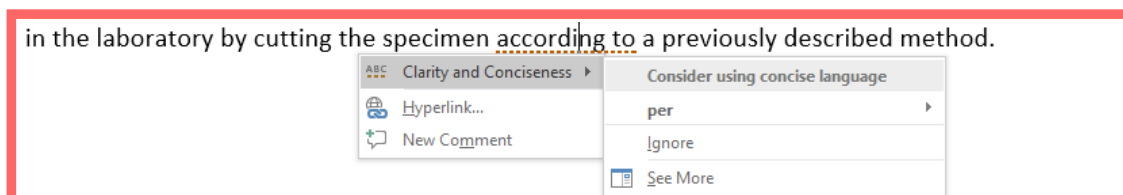
Incorrect comment: Lastly, grammar checkers are sometimes simply wrong. In the example below, the grammar checker has failed to detect that the initial clause in the sentence extends all the way to "mathematical models." If you were to accept its suggestion here, not only would the meaning of the sentence change to "when explaining in a general sense" instead of the more specific meaning that is intended, it would actually cause the sentence to be grammatically incorrect!
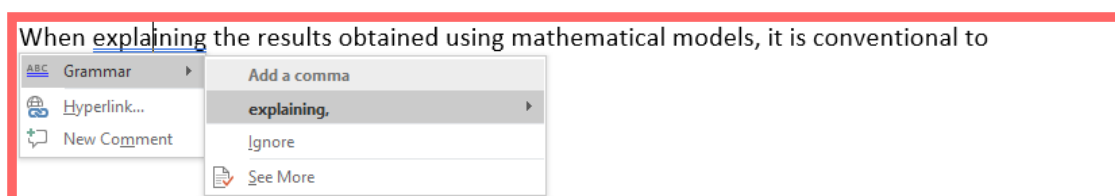
Because of the unreliability inherent in grammar checkers, you should assess whether the suggestions are appropriate before accepting them.

4) Know the collocation

Combinations of multiple words used to express a single concept, such as "receive treatment" or "greatly affect," are known as collocations. These word combinations allow speakers and writers to express a wide range of meaning. However, finding the right collocation can often be difficult for non-native speakers because the specific collocations that "feel natural" can often be somewhat arbitrary and do not appear in conventional dictionaries.

For example, the words "seek," "look for," and "search for" have the same meaning in general English. Despite this, it is natural to write only "seek medical attention." Similarly, "respond to treatment" is natural but "answer to treatment" is not, despite the similarity in meanings between "respond" and "answer." Although a native speaker would probably understand unnatural phrases such as "look for medical attention" and "answer to treatment," because they are unusual word combinations, the meanings must be decoded. This pulls the reader's focus away from your argument.

Because the naturalness of collocations is reflected in native usage, you can improve your grasp of collocations by reading works published by native speakers in your field.

Also, resources such as the Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English can provide a list of common word combinations.

Please see our downloadable summary sheet above for some examples of common collocations and frequent mistakes.

Summary

We hope that these points can help you in writing documents that are not merely accurate and error-free, but that additionally present your writing in a clear and natural way. Many of the issues detailed in this article are not simple rules with unambiguously right or wrong answers. Instead, they require that you carefully consider the needs of your specific manuscript as well as the conventions of your field.

Our specialist native editors would be happy to review your manuscripts and ensure that your writing is as natural as possible.

There are many more strategies for writing naturally. Please keep a look out for future articles throughout 2017 as we return to this important topic.