

SURVEY OF THE MOST IMPORTANT GRAMMAR MISTAKES

1. Tenses (*tijden*)

- 1a **Using the Present Perfect (v.t.t.) instead of the Past (o.v.t.) in sentences containing a definite past time indicator (or in sentences where the context dictates the Past: the Context Past!)** (Examples: ~~Yesterday/two days ago I have been to the hairdresser~~ instead of *yesterday/two days ago I went to the hairdresser.* / ~~In 1990 I have graduated from university~~ instead of *in 1990 I graduated from university.* Definite past time indicators include all structures with *ago*, as well as the adverb *when*. So do not say *when have you moved house?* but *when did you move house?* Examples of the Context Past: *We hebben ook vijf jaar in Brussel gewoond - We also lived in Brussels for five years.* / *Churchill never said that etc.*)
- 1b **Using the Present (o.t.t.) instead of the Present Perfect in situations where the action or situation referred to started in the past and is still going on in the present.** This is often the case where the sentence contains adverbs such as *recently, in the past/last few years/months, this year, for two years, since 1980* etc. (Examples: *Hoe lang ken je haar al?* - ~~How long do you know her (already)?~~ instead of *How long have you known her?* / ~~I live in Amsterdam since 1990/for 10 years~~ instead of *I have lived in Amsterdam since 1990/for 10 years.*) (Incidentally, use *already* as a translation of *al* only if *al* is stressed; secondly note that English uses only *have* as an auxiliary of the Perfect Tense: *when we entered, the train had just arrived* and not ~~was just arrived~~.)
- 1c **Too frequent use of the Progressive (to be + ing form, *he is playing*) rather than the Simple Form (*he plays*) or the reverse: using the Simple Form where the Progressive Form is required.** (The basic rule is that you use the Progressive when the duration of a verb is stressed and when the duration is limited. As a general rule, you do not use it when a *habit* or an *eternal truth* is expressed or when the duration is irrelevant. Note, however, that the *ing* form can be used to refer to a habit when the speaker is irritated by it: *he is always complaining about the food.* Also note that the progressive can be used only with 'dynamic verbs' (verbs that describe an activity, an event or a process or transition) and not with 'stative' verbs (such as mental state verbs – e.g. *admire, believe, doubt, recognise* etc. – inert perception – *hear, see, smell* etc. – or relationship – *belong to, contain* etc.).
- 1d **Using the Simple Present in situations where reference is made to the future.** (Example: ~~He has a meeting with the manager tomorrow~~ instead of *he will have a meeting with the manager tomorrow* or *he is having a meeting with the manager tomorrow.* Note, however, that the Simple Present can be used in cases where the future event is presented as unalterably fixed in the present, so usually in connection with timetables and official programmes etc.: *The next train leaves at 5.30 a.m., the exhibition opens on 1 May, tomorrow is Thursday* etc.)
- 1e **Failure to distinguish between *be* + past participle (voltooid deelwoord) denoting state as opposed to action: *the cup is broken* can be interpreted as a state (Dutch: *is gebroken*), in which case *broken* is in fact an adjective, or as an action (Dutch: *wordt gebroken*), in which case it is a passive sentence and *broken* is a verb.**
- 1f **Failure to use the Past Perfect (v.v.t.) correctly** (The Past Perfect corresponds with the Dutch *o.v.t.* rather than the *v.v.t.* where the action or situation referred to started in the past and was still going on at a later moment in the past: *In 1993 woonden wij al 10 jaar in Londen* should not be rendered as ~~In 1993 we lived in London for 8 years~~, but *in 1993 we had lived in London for 8 years.*)
- 1g **Using *will* or *would* in adverbial subclauses indicating time or condition** (In adverbial subclauses starting with such words as *till, before, when, while, as soon as* (time) or *if, unless, in case, or provided that* (condition), you should not use *will* or *would*; instead you reserve *will* or *would* for the main clause!) (~~When he will come I will tell him~~ - *When he comes I will tell him.*)
- 1h **Failure to recognise that there are two translations of the structures *had kunnen/had moeten/had mogen*, depending on whether or not the action really happened: (1) *had been able to*; (2) *could have* + past participle** (For example, *gelukkig had hij de trein kunnen halen* should not be translated as ~~fortunately he could have caught the train~~ but as *fortunately, he had been able to catch the train* because the action actually happened. Compare this to the sentence *Hij had de trein kunnen halen als hij niet in slaap was gevallen* - *He could have caught the train if only he had not fallen asleep.*)
- 1i **Using *there* in passive sentences** (*Er werd een vergadering belegd* - ~~there was a meeting called~~ - *a meeting was called*).
- 1j **Failure to apply the passive infinitive when the meaning is passive** (~~the book was not to find~~ instead of *the book was not to be found*. After an adjective, however, the active infinitive is always used: *That was easy to do.* / *This is a difficult problem to solve.* Also note: *De generaal gaf bevel het dorp te evacueren* - *The general ordered the village to be evacuated.*)
- Conditional Clauses (voorwaardelijke bijzinnen) (those starting with 'if', 'unless', 'in case' etc.)**
- 1k **Using *will* or *would* directly after *if* etc.** (This is incorrect unless *will* or *would* express a wish rather than neutral future, as in *if you will/would do that for me if you would like ...* In other cases, you must reserve *will* or *would* for the main clause!)
- 1l **Using *could* (to express ability) when the reference is to a specific occasion rather than general:** *Fortunately I could* (should be *was able to* or *managed to*) *catch the train for otherwise I would have been late.*
- 1m **Incorrect translation of Dutch *laten*: *ik laat een huis bouwen* - *I have a house built*; *ik heb een huis laten bouwen* - *I have had a house built.*)**
- 1n **Incorrect verb patterns** (Many verbs can only be used in a fixed pattern. It is impossible to give a general rule for these patterns; you simply have to know the correct patterns for the most important verbs, or know how to look them up. Some verbs, for instance, take an *ing* form (e.g. *avoid, consider, deny, enjoy, prevent*) and others a *to infinitive* (e.g. *agree, decide, want*); yet others can take either, sometimes with and sometimes without a difference in meaning. The *OALD* gives detailed information about verb patterns.)

2. Nouns (*zelfstandige naamwoorden*)

- 2a **Failure to distinguish between count-nouns ('telbare' zelfstandige naamwoorden), and non-count nouns ('niet-telbare' zelfstandige naamwoorden), and, as a result, incorrect use of words such as *many* & *much*, *few(er)* & *less*, *number* & *amount* as well as incorrect use of articles.** (Rule 1: *many, few(er), number* are used before count nouns and *much, less and amount* are used before non-count nouns: *veel stoelen/mensen* - *many chairs/people* (and not ~~much...~~) / *veel boter/geduld* - *much butter/patience* (and not ~~many~~). Rule 2: do not use *a* or *an* before an uncountable noun: *What a patience he can bring himself to*; do not pluralise non-count nouns: ~~advices~~; Rule 3: do not use *the* before a non-count noun used in a general sense: *de dood* - *death* / *de literatuur* - *literature* etc.)
- 2b **Failure to apply the 'concord rules'** (~~*It costs six pound; he ordered three beer; many people lost their life; both his sons are teacher*~~ etc.) Also note : *it is/was the English/his parents who ...* and not ~~*it are/were the English/his parents who ...*~~)

3. Genitive (*genitief; tweede naamval*)

- 3a **Overusing an *of* phrase instead of the 's structure with reference to people. Note that the 's structure is also used in time expressions:** *the friend of Susan* instead of *Susan's friend*; *today's paper* etc.
- 3b **Failure to apply the double genitive correctly:** *He is a friend of my brother's* and not ~~*he is a friend of my brother*~~. This structure is never used when the first noun is preceded by *the*! (Also note: *a friend of mine/his* and not ~~*a friend of me/him*~~.)
- 3c **Failure to distinguish between *its* and *it's*.** (The former is a possessive pronoun, the latter an abbreviation of *it is*.)

Definite and Indefinite Articles (*bepaalde en onbepaalde lidwoorden*)

- 3d **Incorrect use of *the* before uncountable nouns and plural nouns used in a general sense** (The general rule is: only use *the* before non-count nouns and plural nouns when they are used in a specific sense, i.e., when they are followed by a phrase starting with *of* or a relative clause or when they have been made definite by an earlier reference.)
- 3e **Failure to use *a* or *an* before occupations, professions, nationalities, religions, titles etc.** (Examples: *Hij is rechter* - ~~*he is judge*~~ instead of *he is a judge*; also: *he is an Englishman/a Roman-Catholic/a bachelor* etc. However, when the occupation etc. can be held by *one person at a time*, the indefinite article is not used: *He was captain of the ship* or *he was president of the Company* etc.)
- 3f **Incorrect use of adjectives as nouns** (*The English/British/Dutch/Scottish/Irish I met on the train were soccer fans* instead of *The English/British/Dutch/Scottish/Irish people I met on the train were soccer fans*. Rule: *The English* etc. can only be used if the reference is general, e.g.: *I like the English* etc.)

4. Relative Clauses & Pronouns (*betrekkelijke bijzinnen & voornaamwoorden*)

Failure to distinguish between restrictive (*beperkende*) and non-restrictive (*uitbreidende*) relative clauses, and, as a result of that, incorrect placement of commas and incorrect use of *who*, *which* and *that*. (Restrictive clauses do not take commas; non-restrictive clauses do take commas. The relative pronoun *that* can be used only in restrictive clauses (both for people and things) (so never use *that* after comma!); the relative pronouns *who* and *which* can be used in both types of clauses. *Who* refers to people; *which* refers to things (or 'rechtspersonen'!) So do not say ~~*our neighbour's house, that was built on his instructions*~~ ... but *our neighbour's house, which was built on his instructions* ...

Note that the relative pronoun can be left out only where it has a direct object function: *the man who saw me* [*who* cannot be left out!] / *the man (who) I saw* [*who* can be left out!].

- 5 **Using the correct prepositions (*voorzetsels*) is a major problem, too. Unfortunately, they have to be learnt by heart. Keep an eye on *between/among* and *on till* and *to* and *on during, for* and *since*.**
- 6 **Incorrect use of 'one' (as a translation of Dutch *men*)** (English *one* always includes the speaker and hence, you cannot say ~~*In the Middle Ages one was very focused on*~~ ...; *men* is often translated by means of the passive voice or by using structures with *people, they* (when the speaker is excluded) or *you, we* when the speaker is included.)

7. Word Order (*woordvolgorde*)

- 7a **Failure to keep subject and predicator ('gezegde') together:** in Dutch the subject may be separated from the predicator by a clause or group of words; in English they had better be kept together: *Toen hij nadat de onderhandelingen waren afgerond naar huis ging, was nog niemand over het mysterieuze telefoontje geïnformeerd*. - *When after the negotiations were over he went home, nobody had been informed about the mysterious phone call*.
- 7b **Incorrect placement of adverbs!** (Rules: (1) do not put adverbs between verb and direct object; (2) adverbs of definite time are put in front or end position; (3) adverbs of place usually have end position; (4) indefinite time adverbs - *always, sometimes usually, often* etc. - as well as the adverb *also*, are usually put in mid-position; this means: (a) before the main verb; (b) after a form of *to be*; (c) after the first auxiliary. Adverbs of manner are placed in end position when stressed and immediately before the last verb when unstressed.) (Normal order if there is a sequence of adverbs in one position: place - manner - time.)
- 7c **Failure to apply the 'inversion' rule (i.e. change in normal word order, usually between subject and predicator (*gezegde*)), where an adverbial (*bijwoordelijke bepaling*) of negation or restriction opens a sentence or subclause for emphasis purposes.** (The most important adverbials concerned are *hardly/scarcely/barely ... when, no sooner ... than, not only, not until, nowhere, only, rarely, seldom, never, little, on no condition, on no account, in no case, in/under no circumstances*. Examples: ~~*Hardly the match had begun when*~~ ... - *Hardly had the match begun when ...* / ~~*Never before a thing like that had happened*~~ instead of *Never before had such a thing happened*. / ~~*Seldom I have seen such a good film!*~~ - *Seldom have I seen such a good film!* Note that if there is no auxiliary in the sentence, you must use the auxiliary *do* when applying the inversion rule: *Pas toen besefte ik wat er gebeurd was!* - *Only then did I realise what had happened!*
- Note that there is no inversion when the negative adverb is part of the subject: *Hardly a hundred people saw the match*.
- 7d **Saying ~~*a too heavy knocker*~~ rather than *too heavy a knocker*** (This structure is found after *as, how, however, so, that, this and too*: *as great a writer; how exciting a film* etc.)
- 7e **Failure to apply the 'Little Red Riding Hood' rule: ~~*What a big nose have you!*~~ instead of 'What a big nose you have!'**
- 7f **Using typically Dutch (and not: *typical Dutch*) patterns, such as ~~*important is to understand that*~~ ... instead of *it is important to understand that ...* (There are somewhat stricter word order rules in English!)**
- Points to remember
- a Be consistent in using British or American English; so keep an eye on *-re/er, -mme/m, -gue/g, -our/or* (the first are British; the second American!): *theatre* (BE), *theater* (AE); *programme* (BE), *program* (AE); *catalogue* (BE), *catalog* (AE); *humour* (BE), *humor* (AE) etc.
- b Note: *je kunt maar beter iets doen* - *You had better do something*.
- c Try to avoid the split infinitive in formal writing: putting a word between infinitive marker and infinitive, such as *to boldly go where no one has ventured before*.
- d Keep an eye on correct word divisions (*afbrekgrenzen*), because the English rules are different from the Dutch rules.
- e Note that compound nouns (*samenstellingen*) are written separately far more often than in Dutch: ~~*importrestrictions*~~ - *import restrictions* etc. etc. The hyphen is used mainly in premodifying structures: *a 12-year-old girl, a three-mile walk, a 6-pound note* etc.
- f *Full* as a separate word is written with double 'l', but as part of a word, it is: *beautiful* and not ~~*beautifull*~~. (Also note: *cannot* (1 word!))
- g Keep an eye on the difference in meaning between *if* ('indien' = condition) and *in case* ('voor het geval' = precaution): *take out an insurance policy if there is a fire* (=a bit late!) - *take out an insurance policy in case there is a fire* (correct!).

