

**English Writing Suggestions
For
Chinese-Speaking Students**

Revised Edition

Robert L. Fisher

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Introduction

The purpose of this little manual is to list the commonest areas of grammar that give students difficulty and then to offer explanations and solutions in clear, helpful language. The areas of difficulty have been chosen by teachers who have long experience in reading university-level essays written by students whose native language is Chinese. In those cases in which the problem is related to a Chinese way of making sentences, the original Chinese is provided to help the student understand the origin of the difficulty. Almost all the sentences in this manual have been taken from actual student writing. In fact, the selection of which areas to include in the manual was determined by an extensive review of student essays and writing examinations from the Faculty of Engineering and from the COPE Test (Comprehensive Test of Proficiency in English).

Over the years it has become increasingly evident that one characteristic of student essays is most prominent and also hardest to remedy, and that is a tendency to write essays that are too general, too vague in content. Every literate society that engages in essay writing has its own favored style. In the style used in North American universities the emphasis is on argumentation and specific proof. In other words, the reader expects the author to make a concrete claim and then proceed to support that claim with ample evidence — examples in considerable detail, statistics, even first-hand experiences — all presented in logical order. The tradition in Chinese literature is quite different. First of all, East Asian cultures have always been, unlike the West, non-confrontational, that is, individuals rarely openly disagree or handle disputes by onto-to-one argument. Confucian values stress harmony, not debate. As a result, Chinese essays repeat in different words what has been handed down over the generations as wisdom. The content tends to be vague on the surface and it is left to the reader to interpret subtle hints and to “read between the lines”. A great deal is implied, but not stated overtly. The author relies on quotes from the Classics and on proverbs to suggest to the reader what he wants to say.

This tendency to vagueness and generality is aided by the nature of the Chinese language itself. Unlike English, Chinese has very few categories that must be included in a sentence. Subjects may be omitted, and objects even more so. Tense and number are not usually marked unless there is some danger of misunderstanding. Even whether a word is a noun or a verb or an adjective can be decided only from context, and even then there may be more than one way to interpret the sentence. This is especially true of Classical Chinese.

One style of essay writing is not superior to another, but is rather a result of historical circumstances and cultural tradition. It is, however, very important for students to learn the North American style of essay writing since it is required and expected in all university writing and, of course, in society at large.

Errors in English Writing Made by Speakers of Chinese

As a general principle, Chinese sentences have very little information that must be specified. The mechanisms exist to be as specific as needed, but these are all optional. Thus, number, tense, subject, mood, cause and effect relations, condition, voice, transitivity can all be specified but often are not. By contrast, English sentences must be very specific in regard to all these categories. This is why Chinese sentences, and English sentences written by Chinese, often appear telegraphic or

gnomic.

Conjunctions:

1. **Although...but...:** ***“Although** he understood the answer, **but** he couldn't say it in English.”

English does not require the second conjunction *but*. This is the rule with several conjunctions that in Chinese require coordinate conjunctions whereas English requires only the first one.

Suírán...dànshì... 雖(虽)然 ...但是

2. **Since...therefore**

***Since** the weather report said it was going to rain on Saturday, **therefore** we cancelled the picnic.

Yīnwei...suǒyī... 因為(为)... 所以

Another variation on **since...therefore** is **because...so**:

***“Because** I didn't know him, **so** I didn't say anything.”

3. **Even:** ***“Even** he knows the answer, he will keep quiet.”

English requires another conjunction, *if*: **“Even if** he knows the answer, he will keep quiet.”

4. **Until:** This is a conjunction that causes great confusion for Chinese learners of English. Compare the following Chinese and English sentences:

Tā zǒu le liǎng ge zhōngtóu cái dào.
He travel -ed two DET hour only-then arrive.

他走了兩個(个)鐘頭(钟头)才到。

“He did not arrive until he had traveled for two hours.”

(Note: DET means Determiner, the word between a number and a noun.)

The English until-clause contains a negative that is not in the Chinese sentence, and the position of the clauses is reversed. Thus, Chinese speakers may write English sentences such as:

***“He took a rest until** he had finished his work.”

“He did not rest until he had finished his work.”

Adjectives and nouns

In Chinese the same word may function as adjective or noun:

fāng 方 can mean “square” (adjective) or “direction” (noun) or “prescription” (noun).

English words may also function in many ways, too: “square” can be an adjective as in a “square table” or a noun as in “the people met in the public square”. But very often English adjectives and nouns are different in form: *high* vs. *height*, *red* vs. *redness*. A very common source of trouble for students is the difference between words ending in *-ence/-ance* and those ending in *-ent/-ant*. The former are nouns, the latter are adjectives:

“We decided to meet at a **convenient** time and place.”

“Is eight o’clock **convenient** for you?”

“Austin likes the **convenience** of the bank machines — he can get money and pay bills any time of day, any day of the week.”

“**Convenience** to transportation is important when choosing a place to live.”

Another pair of words that can be confusing is *difficulty* (noun) and *difficult* (adjective):

“This mathematics course is very **difficult**.”

“Engineering science is the most **difficult** major in engineering.”

“Clive has many **difficulties** these days — learning English, studying engineering, and working a part-time job.”

“Alice’s major **difficulty** with English is writing essays.”

Tense

1. Misuse of **had + past participle (past perfect tense)**:

*“I **had worked** every summer in Hong Kong at my father’s business.”

“I **have worked** every summer in Hong Kong at my father’s business.”

Students may be confused because they see **have** as a present tense and think they should change this to the past tense, **had**, to obtain a past meaning. However, the *combination* of **have + past participle** is past in meaning, despite the fact that the auxiliary is in the present tense. This is why the tense is called **present perfect**.

The **past perfect (had + past participle)** has only two uses in English:

1) To designate the first of two past actions, and 2) a past unreal condition.

I **had finished** writing my assignment when I **noticed** how late it was.

The first action is finishing the assignment, the second is noticing how late it was.

If I **had known** your telephone number, I would have called you.

This describes an imaginary situation in the past (the fact is I did *not* know your telephone number).

2. Use of future (**will + verb**) for the simple present tense. This error is especially common in cause-and-effect essays:

*“In a recession many people **will** lose their jobs. They **will** feel scared. They **won’t** be able to pay their bills.”

This error results from the assumption that at the beginning of the discourse there is an if-clause: “If there is a recession, people will lose their jobs...” But there is no such if-clause; instead, the simple present is used to describe general, enduring conditions:

“During a recession people lose their jobs. They feel scared. They aren't able to pay their bills.”

Sometimes the future tense seems logical but the present tense is used with *before* and *after*:

“Before you go to the airport, please call me.”

“After you arrive in New York tomorrow, be sure to go to the art gallery.”

Transitivity:

1. Intransitive verbs cannot be used in the passive voice (**be + past participle**):

*“The accident was occurred when the car went off the road.”

*“The accident was happened when the car went off the road.”

This would appear to be a translation of Chinese: **Shìgù shì shénme shíhòu fāshēngde** “Accident is what time happened/occurred.” 事故是甚麼 (甚么) 時候 (时候) 發生 (发生) 得?

Voice:

1. Very frequent confusion between active **-ing** and passive **-ed**:

*“I am **boring**.” When the meaning is “I am **bored**.”

*“This book is **interested**.”

-ing means “one who does an action”, thus **boring** = “one who bores someone”.

-ed mean “one who receives the action or is acted upon”, thus **bored** = “one who receives boredom”.

2. The verb is “**be interested in**”. When “interest” is a verb, it used without **in**: “This idea interests me.”

*“We interest in the story.”

“We **are interested in** the story.”

Number:

1. *“One of my friend is here.” The pronoun “one” is confused with the number “one” (it does mean, after all, “One friend is here [out of many]”), causing the noun to be put in the singular. This construction should be understood to mean “one in a set of many friends”.

2. As rule, abstract nouns do not have a plural: *“informations”. One would have to say, “I received several bits/pieces of information” if it is necessary to indicate that the information came in discreet units.

Article use:

An easy rule about when to use “the”:

If a noun is followed by a prepositional phrase (PREP) or a relative clause, you should use “the” before the noun (REL = relative conjunction: that, which, who):

The newspaper **on the table** belongs to Mary.

PREP + NOUN

The iPhone **that** my teacher just bought is very thin.

REL + NOUN

I wrote an e-mail to **the** student **who** is in my economics class.

NOUN + REL

1. Abstract nouns usually do not take the definite article “the”, unless they are specified in some way.

*“The society is changing rapidly these days.”

But, “The society I live in is changing rapidly these days.”

“Liberty must be safeguarded.”

But, “The liberty to speak freely should be safeguarded.”

2. Certain concrete nouns are considered to be mass nouns and therefore do not take the plural -s:

*“furnitures”

If it is necessary to indicate individual units one must say, “Twenty pieces of furniture were in the room.”

“**There + be**”:

1. *“There is someone knows your name.” This is a translation of Chinese **yǒu rén zhīdao nǐde míngzi** (there-is someone know your name”). 有人知道你的名字。

“Someone knows your name” or “There is someone **who** knows your name” are correct.

“**It**”:

1. When referring back to an idea, concept or situation, it is usual to use “this”, not “it” (which generally refers to a specific thing):

The results of the First World War were not seen until decades later. *It is because...”

The results of the First World War were not seen until decades later. **This** is because...

Plural

Chinese is a language in which number is implied from the context:

Yǒu qiānbǐ méi you? “Do you have any pencils?”

have pencil not have

有 鉛筆 (鉛筆) 沒有?

Qiānbǐ, gāngbǐ, máobǐ wǒmen dōu yǒu.

pencil pen brush we all have

“Pencils, pens, brushes — we have them all.”

鉛筆 (铅笔, 鋼筆 (钢笔), 毛筆 (毛笔) 都有。

Speakers of Chinese may not mark the plural in English, even after a number (“I have four brother, two sister”). There are at least two reasons for this:

1. In Chinese a word never ends in a group of consonants; in fact, in Mandarin a word may only end in a vowel or the consonants -n or -ng. In Cantonese a word may end either in a vowel or in -p, -t, -k, -m, -n, or -ng. Combinations of final consonants like in the English words *cups*, *tourists*, *risks*, *subjects*, *strengths*, *tables*, *chairs* are not possible in Chinese. The result is that the [s] or [z] of the English plural may not be pronounced at the end of a group of consonants: *‘‘I know people who speak with those accent.’’

2. As mentioned above, Chinese speakers may carry over into English the habit of implying number from the context:

Wǒmen dōu shì xuésheng.

我們 (我们) 都是學生 (学生) .

We all be student

‘‘We are students.’’

This may explain a frequent type of error: *‘‘We are a student.’’ Here the ‘‘we’’ implies plural, therefore no need is felt to mark it again in the noun ‘‘student’’. The marking of the plural may be haphazard, especially in lists or connected prose involving the same word: *‘‘I buy this New Year thing: flower, orange, and sweets,’’ or *‘‘they were driven through the gates of the school and the gate locked behind them.’’

Another complication is marking a word as plural when in English it is usually singular. This is especially common with mass nouns:

*furnitures

*equipments

*machineries

*staffs

*works (in sense of labor)

*damages (not in legal sense)

*experiences (as abstract noun)

*luggages

- *sceneries
- *jeweleries
- *aircrafts
- *vocabularies

The confusion may arise from three sources:

1. Sometimes these same nouns are used as count nouns, but with altered meanings:
 - “the works of Shakespeare” (his artistic products)
 - “He was awarded one million dollars in damages” (amount assessed by a court)
 - “pleasant experiences in Hawaii” (events).
2. A mass noun, like furniture, may be interpreted as one item of furniture: *A table is a furniture, or *The room contains 12 furnitures. In such cases English, exactly like Chinese, requires a determiner before the noun: 12 pieces/items of furniture, equipment, machinery, etc. “Vocabularies” means lists of words, but students sometimes use “vocabularies” to mean “vocabulary items” (that is, words on a vocabulary list).
3. The mass noun may look very similar to a related count noun:

machinery machine
scenery scenes
jewelry jewel

While other mass nouns refer to groups of countable nouns:

aircraft: jumbo jets, helicopters, fighter planes
luggage: bag, suitcases.

4. There is an increasing tendency in spoken, and to some extent in written English to eliminate the distinction between mass and count nouns. Advertisers announce their selection of fine “leathers”, “cheeses”, “breads”, and the like. One often hears nowadays phrases such as “less soldiers”, “less people”. Having observed “less” preceding count nouns, students may have concluded that the plural marker can be suffixed to any noun.

less soldiers :: less luggages.

It turns out that the differing concepts of number in English and Chinese are related to a contrast between **definite/indefinite** (English) versus **specific/non-specific** (Chinese). In English the definite is marked by *the*, whereas the indefinite is indicated by *a(n)*. The core of this distinction is lies in whether what is being referred to is known or unknown to the listener or reader. *The* is used when the person or object is known because:

- 1) The listener or reader has come across them before:

“*The* girl who phoned you yesterday was my secretary.”

2) There is only one of them in the universe:

“*The* sun is rising.”

3) There is only one of them in the particular context:

“Let’s go to *the* park.”

4) They belong to a known group or species:

“*The* penguin is a flightless bird.”

A(n) is used the person is thought to be unknown to the listener or reader because:

1) He has not come across them before:

“I’ll tell you about *a* nice restaurant we went to yesterday.”

2) No particular person or object is referred to:

“I couldn’t find *a* seat.”

This system contrasts with but partly overlaps that of the specific/non-specific distinction. A noun is **specific** when a person or object is thought by the speaker or writer:

1) To have been previously unknown to the listener or reader:

Chinese: **tā yǒu yì běn dà shū.**

he has one DET big book.

“He has a big book.”

他有一本大書(书)。

2) To have been previously known to the listener or reader:

Chinese: **tā mǎi le nà běn shū.**

he buy PERF that DET book.

他買了那本書(书)。

“He bought the book.”

*“He bought one book.”

A noun is **non-specific** when

1) The person or object is unknown to the speaker or writer or the identity of the item is thought by him to be irrelevant to the issue he is discussing or is thought to be obvious:

Chinese: **tā mǎi le shū.**
He buy PERF book.

他買了書(书)。

“He bought a book.”

*“He bought book.”

2) The person or object is not particular ones but belong to a group, type or species:

Chinese: **gǒu cóngmíng.**

Dog smart.

狗聰明(聪明)。

“The dog is smart” (that is, “The species dog is smart,” “Dogs are smart.”)

*“Dog (is) smart.”

The main distinction between **definite** and **indefinite** is **known:unknown**, whereas the main difference between **specific** and **non-specific** is **particular:not particular**. This is probably why many writers of English whose native language is Chinese write sentences like:

*“Everyone has car.”

Instead of: “Everyone has a car.”

*“I have very kind mother.”

Instead of: “I have a very kind mother.”

*“When I get job I’ll quit school.”

Instead of: “When I get a job I’ll quit school.”

In the above examples the nouns are **non-specific**.

A complication is that the **specific : non-specific** contrast may contain a further distinction between previously known and previously unknown to the listener or speaker. This introduces a definite:indefinite contrast into the **specific : non-specific** opposition. When the person or object is previously unknown the tendency is to use “one” before the noun:

*“I’m staying in one house with three other students.”

*“He got one stall selling soup noodles.”

*“I took one passenger to East Coast Road.”

In Standard English *a(n)* would be used instead of *one*. Historically, *a(n)* is a reduced (unaccented) form of *one*.

If the person or object is known to the listener or speaker, *the* is sometimes used, just as in Standard

English, but perhaps more often *this/these* or *that/those* is used. Standard English only uses *this/these* when the object is physically present to point at.

“I didn’t buy the dress.” (The dress we were talking about earlier.)

*“Did you buy this handbag you wanted to buy the other day?”

“Did you buy that handbag you wanted to buy the other day?”

This usage very likely derives from the fact that, although Chinese lacks a definite article, it does have demonstratives and these are the closest equivalents to the English definite article.

Furthermore, when the demonstrative is used, singular and plural may not be distinguished:

*“All of this problems...”

The underlying reason for the lack of distinction between *this* and *these* is probably phonological: in English the opposition between “these” /ði:z/ and “this” /ðis/ depends mainly on the difference between the vowels /i:/ and /i/, which is lacking in Chinese.

Possession

The possessive suffix, -’s, is used primarily with animate nouns, John’s textbook, Mary’s computer, but also with the names of cities, regions, states, provinces and countries: Canada’s deficit, Ontario’s water quality, Toronto’s transportation system. With inanimate nouns either the of-construction is used (the quality of life, the enjoyment of golf, the history of the problem), or a compound noun is formed (the table top, the deficit reduction, the railway station). There is a tendency among many students to use -’s with both animate and inanimate nouns:

*“the computer program’s end”

“the end of the computer program.”

*“the pollution’s cost”

“the cost of pollution”.

This universal use of -’s may derive from the all-purpose subordinating suffix in Chinese, **-de 的** (Cantonese **-d↔k**), which may be used with both animate and inanimate nouns:

Lǐ Xiānshengde máobing

Lee Mr ’s illness [literally, defect]

李先生的毛病。

“Mr Lee’s illness”

qìchede máobing

automobile defect

汽車 (汽车) 的毛病。

“car trouble”.

Pronouns

Chinese does not distinguish gender in its pronouns: **tā** (Cantonese **kœi**) means he, she, it. Only in writing is a distinction made: the character for **tā** may be written with the man-prefix or woman-prefix, but the pronunciation remains the same. This is apparently the source of the difficulty many Chinese speakers have with using *he* and *she* properly. Many times students use the two pronouns indiscriminately or in random alternation:

*“My father owns a supermarket. He works long hours. She sometimes doesn't get home till midnight.”

The same phenomenon is observable with the use of *him/her* and *his/her*.

“Over” + Number

In students' writings one sometimes encounters expressions such as:

*“Ninety over books”, *“Ninety more books.”

“Over ninety books”.

This would appear to be a literal translation of Chinese:

jiǔshí duō běn shū

ninety many DET book

九十多本書 (书)

“over ninety books”.

(Cantonese has a similar construction, except that **guò 過 (过)** “exceed, pass” is used instead of **duō 多**.)

“And” in lists

Although not strictly required, English, as a matter of style, usually places “and” between the last two members of a list:

“I have pears, apples, oranges and lemons.” (A comma after the second to last item is optional.)

Students, however, frequently omit the “and”:

*“I have pears, apples, oranges, lemons.”

*“Altogether I have two brother(s), four sister(s).”

Errors Involving Verbs

Progressive (Continuous) Tenses

Except in special meanings, verbs describing states (*be, know, doubt, like, have, think*) are not used in the progressive tenses. Students, however, sometimes use these verbs with *be + -ing*:

*“Trevor is having a cold.”

*“Clive is knowing the answer.”

*“Wendy is doubting whether he will come.”

*“Andrea is thinking she is smarter than the other students.”

When *have* is used with *-ing*, the meaning is “experiencing”:

I am having a difficult time understanding these equations.

Are you having a good time? (= Are you enjoying yourself?)

Shelly is having a bad day.

Nick is having dinner now.

Have + VERB + -ing is also used to mean “being pregnant”:

“Beverley is having a baby.”

To be thinking about means to be in the process of using the mind (for solving a problem, for memory, for planning, etc.):

“I was thinking about the Blue Jays when the teacher asked me a question.”

“Chris is thinking about traveling to France next year.”

“I am thinking about when I was ten years old.”

Think, without *-ing*, means “believe, have the opinion that”:

“Peggy thinks Hamish is taller than Derek.”

Note that *think* in the past tense (*thought*) implies your opinion which has now changed because you

have the correct information:

“Peggy thought Hamish was taller than Derek” (until she saw them side by side).

“Five hundred years ago many people thought the earth was flat.”

Past tense

There is a tendency for students not to use the past tense when the verb requires a vowel change (write : wrote, come : came, speak : spoke) or when [t] or [d] is used to mark the past (walked, robbed, looked, watched, finished). In the latter case it is assumed that the difficulty in pronouncing groups of consonants at the end of words is the main cause.

Prepositions used with non-preposition verbs or wrong preposition used with a verb

Many verbs which do not require a following preposition are often supplied with one in students' writings:

*“We discussed *about* that yesterday afternoon.”

*“Debbie emphasized *on* her interest in medicine.”

*“He lacks *of* good manners.”

The root of this problem may be that the associated nouns *do* take a preposition:

“a discussion *about* taxation”

“an emphasis *on* energy conservation”

“a lack *of* growth in the economy”.

A common mistake is to use *with* with “marry”, and *from* with “divorce”:

*He married *with* a charming girl.”

“He married a charming girl.”

*“Julie finally divorced *from* her husband.”

“Julie finally divorced her husband.”

This is a literal translation of Chinese **gēn... jiéhun** 跟...結婚 (結婚). English “marry” requires no preposition. “Divorce” as a verb also does not require a preposition. The “from” in students' writings may come from the expression “to get a divorce *from* someone”.

Other common errors are:

*“Evelyn goes school very early.”

“Evelyn goes to school very early.”

This may be built on the model of “go shopping, skiing, swimming, go home, etc.” or it may be a direct translation from Chinese.

Existential verb

To express existence English uses the phrase “there is/are”, “there was/were”. The number of the verb is determined by the number of the following noun:

“There were many good reasons not to go.”

“There was a good reason to go.”

“There are many nations in the UN.”

“There is an elm tree in our backyard.”

Students occasionally write *“it has” for “there is/are”:

*“It has a very busy street in Central District in Hong Kong.”

“There is a very busy street in central District in Hong Kong.”

*“It has” is almost certainly a literal translation of Chinese **yǒu 有** (Cantonese **yau**), which means both “there is/are” and “has/have”. In English, unlike Chinese, the verb “have” cannot do double duty as a verb of possession and of existence.

Related to this is the expression *“it has meaning”, which is found from time to time in students’ writings, and is used to mean “it is interesting”. Again, *“it has meaning” is a word-for-word translation of Chinese **yǒu yìsi 有意思** “it is interesting” (literally, have meaning).

In English the expression “it is”, the “it” is a dummy subject, that is, it has no meaning but is used primarily to fill the obligatory subject slot of a sentence. Students sometimes drop this “it” since in Chinese the pronoun is not necessary:

*“Here is very cheap,” or “In here is very cheap.”

“Here it is very cheap,” or “It is very cheap here.”

Compare:

Mandarin: **Zài zhèr hěn piányi.**

In here very cheap

在這兒 (在这儿) 很便宜

Cantonese: **(Hai) yido ho peng.**
(In) here very cheap
“It is very cheap here.”

Modals

Pronoun Copying

Many times students add a pronoun to the subject of a sentence:

“My mother, she works very hard.”
“Our Chinese people, we like fish very much.”

Such a construction is often heard in colloquial English but is considered inappropriate for written English. In writing the added pronoun is not used: “My mother works very hard,” “The Chinese like fish very much.”

People, Person, Human Being

Students have a fondness for the phrase “human being” or “humans”, but English prefers the term “people”. “Humans” and “human being(s)” are only used when it is important to distinguish them from animals or, in science fiction and fantasy stories, from aliens or such creatures as dwarves, elves, and monsters:

“In *Lord of the Rings*, the elves traded goods with the humans.”
“Mad cow disease may infect humans.”
“Human beings, unlike other animals, are self-aware.”

It is not necessary in English to add “people” to the names of nationalities. It is more common to say or write:

“The French have a long tradition of fine cooking.”
“The Chinese live in many countries in Southeast Asia.”
“The Italians have produced many fine artists.”
“The Germans have recently reunified their country.”

Note that the names of nationalities are preceded by “the” and are plural nouns, even though those ending in -ish, -ch, and -ese have no s-suffix:

“The Spanish are famous for their love of bull fights.”
“The Portuguese have settled in many American seaports.”

Word Order

Question words and relative pronouns

In English the words *how*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *which* can function as question-words (“How are you?”, “What is your name?”, “Which one do you like?”) and as relative pronouns (“I didn’t hear what he said,” “I know how hard she works,” “That’s the book which you gave me.”). When they are used as question words the order of subject and verb is reversed; instead of saying *“Your name is what?”, we say, “What is your name?” But when these words are relative pronouns the word order is the same as in any ordinary declarative sentence. Students, however, tend to use the question word order even when the sentence is declarative:

*“I know what is his name.”
“I know what his name is.”
*“Sally understands what does he mean.”
“Sally understands what he means.”
*“Nobody knows how do i feel.”
“Nobody knows how I feel.”
*“Roderick told us why does he study engineering.”
“Roderick told us why he studies/is studying engineering.”
*“Penny didn’t say where was she going.”
“Penny didn’t say where she was going.”

Position of adverbs

In English adverbs like *already*, *only*, and *even* are placed *before* the word or groups of words they emphasize; however, students sometimes place them after:

*“By the time I graduate I will be too old already.”
“By the time I graduate I will already be too old.”
*“At home we talk in Chinese only.”
“At home we talk only in Chinese.”
*“Some stores will not accept US dollars even.”
“Some stores will not even accept US dollars.”

Adverbs are usually placed between modals (*shall*, *should*, *can*, *could*, *will*, *would*, *may*, *might*, *must*,

ought to) and the verb:

“Rusty may already be at home.”

“She could even call you tonight.”

“Tracey should only be responsible for chapter seven.”

As a general rule, adverbs in English come after verbs, just the opposite of Chinese:

*“Tomorrow morning I’ll come.”

“I’ll come tomorrow morning.”

*“This evening at seven o’clock we are going to meet.”

“We are going to meet at seven o’clock this evening.”

Modals and Communicative Performance

Modals, as mentioned above, are the words *shall, will, may, can, must, ought to* and their **grammatical** past tense forms *should, would, might, had to, ought to have*. This second group is past in form as far as grammar is concerned, but their meaning has little to do with the idea of past time. You can remember that *should, would, might, and had to* are grammatically past tenses by noting that they all end in *-d* or *-t*, the past tense suffix that you see in words like *called* or *slept*. The *have in ought to have* (+ past participle) makes *ought* into a grammatical past tense. The modals are extremely important because they are used in many ways to express polite instructions, invitation, requests and suggestions.

“Please read this article.” (Polite, but considered rather direct or abrupt.)

“You may like to read this letter.” (Softer suggestion.)

“I suggest you have a word with him.” (Sounds like a command or strong suggestion.)

“You might want to have a word with him.” (Suggestion with no feeling that this is a command.)

When talking of a past imaginary situation (“If I had only known...[but of course I didn’t know]), the result clause takes *would have* + past participle):

“If I had known you were in town, I would have gone to the concert with you.”

Four Simple Rules for Conditional Sentences

The rules for conditional sentences can be reduced to four formulas:

For real conditions, talking about the present:

1. If + PRESENT, (then) PRESENT/FUTURE

“If you heat water, it boils/will boil.”

For real conditions, talking about the past:

2. If + PAST, (then) PAST

“In the old Soviet Union if you criticized the government, you went to jail.”

For imaginary conditions, talking of the present:

3. If PAST, (then) WOULD + VERB

“If I were/was you, I would save my money.”

For imaginary conditions, talking of the past:

4. If HAD + PAST PARTICIPLE, (then) WOULD HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

“If I had studied hard, I would have gotten an A on the final exam.”

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