

English Manual for Middle School



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Introduction

In this English Manual, you will find the tools and information you need to become a better writer. Grammar, sentence structure, parts of speech, paragraph skills, citations, and essay formats are all essential elements of good writing. Some of this information will be familiar and can serve as a quick refresher. Other concepts may be new. Look over the table of contents to familiarize yourself with what this manual contains so you can refer to it whenever you have a question.



Adjectives

Adjectives describe nouns and make sentences more interesting. They are descriptive words that give us more information about people and things.

For instance, consider this sentence:

The cat walked down the lane.

That is a complete sentence, but it doesn't paint a very complete or interesting picture. See what happens when we add some descriptive **adjectives**:

*The **yellow striped** cat walked down the **winding, shady** lane.*

The adjectives help to give a much clearer picture of what is going on in the sentence.

In addition to making sentences more interesting, adjectives can provide essential information. Perhaps you are told, "You are supposed to meet a man at the station." This sentence doesn't give much information. Adjectives can make all the difference: "You are supposed to meet a tall old man who walks with a cane at the new bus station downtown." Now you have the information you need!



Adverbs

Adverbs tell how, when, or where something is done. They are similar to adjectives in that they make a sentence much more interesting and informative; adjectives describe the noun and adverbs describe the verb. For instance, consider this sentence:

The cat walked down the lane.

Now, let's see how that sentence can be enhanced by using an **adverb**:

*The cat walked **jauntily** down the lane.*

There are different types of adverbs. Here are some examples of each:

| HOW (adverbs of manner, degree, or frequency) | WHEN (adverbs of time) | WHERE (adverbs of place) |
|--|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| quickly | afterward | above |
| slowly | now | here |
| softly | soon | outside |
| almost | then | downstairs |

| HOW (adverbs of manner, degree, or frequency) | WHEN (adverbs of time) | WHERE (adverbs of place) |
|--|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| very | yesterday | below |
| usually | immediately | there |



Analogies, Metaphors, and Similes

Analogies, metaphors, and similes are writing techniques that writers use to compare things that are different. These comparisons point out similarities that help emphasize certain qualities. Many writers have trouble understanding the difference between these three techniques, so don't worry if you do, too. The more you work with them, the easier it will be to differentiate between them.

A **simile** points to how two unlike things are like each other. The words *like* or *as* are used in a simile to make the comparison obvious. Here are some examples of similes:

A quiet mind is like a calm lake.

The students were as busy as bees.

A **metaphor** makes the comparison by describing one thing as another very different thing. To say someone is “wet behind the ears” is an old metaphor meaning the person is young and inexperienced; it doesn't literally mean the person has wet ears. Here are some examples of metaphors:

The kindergarten classroom was a merry-go-round of color.

After the party, the house was a train wreck.

An **analogy** takes the comparison one step further by elaborating on it, usually by referring to something familiar to help clarify something more complex or less familiar.

Analogies can use metaphors or similes (or both).

The smog darkened the sky, burying the town under layers of moldy, suffocating blankets.

The playful mood spread until the three dogs became like clowns on the center stage, performing a comedy routine as they grinned at the crowd.

All three literary techniques make comparisons between different things. The subtle differences between similes, metaphors, and analogies are sometimes easier to grasp when the techniques are seen side by side.

Simile: My dreams are like delicate birds

Metaphor: My dreams are delicate birds.

Analogy: My dreams are delicate birds, frantically beating against the cage of my life.

These writing techniques can make your writing more vivid and expressive. However, it's easy to go overboard, especially with analogies. A poor analogy uses language that doesn't match the intended result.

Bad analogy: *The dancer lifted her arms delicately and turned her head to the side, like she was sniffing her armpit and wondering whether she remembered to wear deodorant.*

Why it is bad: "sniffing her armpit" does not contribute to the overall impression of the graceful dancer.

Better: *The dancer lifted her arms delicately and turned her head to the side, like a gazelle gazing into the distance, ready to leap across the field.*



Articles

Articles are a special kind of an adjective (some people consider them a separate part of speech). They give us information about a noun. There are only three articles: *a*, *an*, *the*.

A and *an* are **indefinite articles**, and *the* is a **definite article**. This means that *the* is used to refer to a specific noun, while *a* and *an* simply identify general classes of things. *She stole the briefcase* indicates that a particular, individual briefcase was stolen, whereas *She stole a briefcase* means that some briefcase somewhere was stolen, but doesn't tell which one.

While you are probably quite clear about using *a* before a word that begins with a consonant and *an* before a word that begins with a vowel, there are some tricky words. They all begin with the letter H. This is because the letter H can have a hard sound (*hat*, *hurry*, *history*) or be unpronounced (*hour*, *honor*, *honest*, *heir*). Checking the pronunciation will clue you in to the correct indefinite article: *an hour*, *an honor*, *a hat*, *a historical event*.



Note-Taking Skills

Taking notes on your reading or research is an important part of learning. Without taking notes, it would be very hard to remember specific details, and it would be easy to confuse your facts. It takes practice to learn how to take good notes.

A good way to take notes is to use 3" x 5" index cards. On each card, write a few important facts about what you have read. Do this for each chapter or article you read. When it is time to write your report or essay, you can put the cards in the order you wish and use your notes to create your outline.

Much of the writing which you will be asked to do will concern itself with these basic questions:

- Who is this about? Who is involved?
- What is this about? What happened or might happen?
- When did specific events take place?
- Where did specific events happen?
- Why did it happen? Why did it happen in this place, at this time?
- How did it come about? What caused it?

Always use these questions to guide your research or note-taking so that you have some basis for understanding the material you read.

Try to identify the key ideas in what you are reading. Write down these main ideas (they will often form the framework of your outline). In addition, look for specific details that are interesting to you. Write these down as well. The details are what you will use to fill in your outline. For every main idea you write about, you will want to have supporting details that give additional information or provide evidence or “proof.” The details are what help you “support your opinion” or “prove your point.” In writing, it’s often not enough just to make a statement—you have to back it up with details, examples, or facts.

When writing notes, include any facts or ideas you feel will be useful when it is time to write your essay or report. Be sure to use your own words, instead of copying from the book, article, or website. If you do want to quote something directly word for word, you must write it with quotation marks around it and note the author’s name and page number where you found it (or the magazine or website).

This is an important point: if you write a quote in quotation marks and say where it came from, it is clear that you are borrowing the words. If you just write down the words without quotation marks or giving the original author credit, it seems like these are your words. This is actually a kind of stealing called *plagiarism*, and students and scholars around the world must learn to be very careful to avoid doing this.

As long as you write things in your own words, and give credit and use quotation marks when borrowing someone else's words, you will be fine. Talk to your parent or teacher if you are unsure of whether or not you are doing it correctly.

Sometimes you will be writing down notes that are your own original ideas, or your own ideas sparked by what you are reading or learning about. Writing down your ideas, either on index cards, in a list, or in an idea web, will help you remember them and have something to expand on when you begin organizing your ideas into an outline.



Prepositions and Prepositional Phrases

A **preposition** is a word that usually shows position. Prepositions point out relationships. One way to remember prepositions is to think of them in relation to a particular noun, such as *cloud*. You can go *through* a cloud, or *under* a cloud, or *among* the clouds.

There are about 150 prepositions in the English language! Here are some commonly used prepositions:

| | | |
|---------|---------|---------|
| above | behind | of |
| about | beside | off |
| across | between | on |
| after | by | over |
| against | during | through |
| along | except | to |
| among | for | toward |
| around | from | upon |
| at | into | under |
| before | near | with |

A **prepositional phrase** is the combination of a preposition and a noun or pronoun and its modifiers. Examples: *in love*, *above me*, *on our house*.

Prepositional phrases can act as adjectives or adverbs in a sentence. When a prepositional phrase works as an adjective, it tells you more about the subject in the sentence. It answers the question “Which one?” When it works as an adverb, it tells you more about the predicate. It tells you when, where, or how. Let’s look at some examples (the prepositional phrases are in purple).

The quilt from Grandma is my favorite. (*from Grandma* acts as an adjective, telling which quilt)

My mom likes to sit in the garden. (*in the garden* acts as an adverb, telling where)

If you remove a prepositional phrase from a sentence, the sentence will still be complete:

The quilt is my favorite.

My mom likes to sit.

This is because even though the prepositional phrase has a noun, it does not contain the subject of the sentence.

Prepositional phrases often have **modifiers**, which allow them to give more information and usually make them more interesting. In the following sentences, the prepositional phrases are in purple and the modifiers are underlined.

We walked along the quiet, windswept beach.

The tree under my big bedroom window blooms beautifully in the spring.

The first sentence contains an adverb phrase since *along the quiet, windswept beach* tells where we walked. The second sentence has two prepositional phrases. The first tells us which tree we're talking about (the one under my big bedroom window), so it serves as an adjective; the second tells us when the tree blooms (in the spring), so it serves as an adverb.

Consider this sentence:

The clouds gathered in the darkening sky before the storm.

There are two prepositional phrases in this sentence. Can you spot them? Both phrases act as adverbs, telling where and when the clouds gathered. (Answer: *in the darkening sky* and *before the storm*.)

There are two important things to remember about prepositional phrases:

- The subject of a sentence is never found within a prepositional phrase.
- When analyzing sentences, it is a good idea to identify the prepositional phrases first. That way you won't accidentally mislabel the subject.

Consider this example:

During a long week of rain, the youngest of my children ran from the house in her pajamas in frustration.

In a long sentence like this, it can be challenging to find the subject and the verb. But, if you first identify all the prepositional phrases:

during a long week

of rain

of my children

from the house

in her pajamas

in frustration

You are left with the basic subject and verb: *The youngest ran.* Notice this is still a complete sentence.



Prewriting Techniques

When writing an essay or report, it helps to **brainstorm** ideas before you begin writing. This helps you think of all the different aspects of your topic that you might want to include. Some writers like to jot down whatever random thoughts come to them, often putting them in a list. Some like to choose one idea and follow it as far as possible before pursuing another idea. Discussing your ideas with another person is another effective brainstorming technique.

Some writers use **clustering** to organize their initial ideas before writing. This involves placing your subject in the center of a paper, drawing a circle around it, and then placing ideas in a cluster around it. You can then make clusters around all the surrounding ideas as well, until you feel you have enough ideas to begin your research or writing.

An **idea web** is similar. It begins with a circle in which you write the main idea. On spokes radiating out from the circle, jot down general topics within the main idea. Then, add spokes to each of those new topics, to include details. This is called an idea web because it can resemble a spider web by the time you are done.

Another option is **freewriting**. This involves writing non-stop about your topic for ten or fifteen minutes. You start writing as if you had just been asked to make an impromptu speech, putting down whatever thoughts you have without concern for spelling, grammar, or sequence. Afterwards, you choose the ideas and details that you like and use them to create an outline or begin writing.

The advantage of brainstorming before you begin your paper is that you don't need to decide the order of your information right away; you can just focus on writing down all the ideas you want to include and seeing how they are related. Your idea web, list, or other prewriting technique will help you figure out what to include in your report, as related ideas often become the topic of a paragraph. After you identify the main ideas you want to include, you can decide what order you want to present your information. The order of your information is the beginning of an organized outline.



Subject Variations

Subjects name who or what is doing the action in a sentence. Subjects can move around in a sentence and sometimes even disappear entirely, so it helps to know what to look for.

Sometimes the subject is after the verb. Consider this sentence:

In the middle of the street stood the frightened child.

Who or what stood? **the frightened child**

What did the subject do? **In the middle of the street stood**

If you reword it, it's easy to spot the subject and predicate:

The frightened child stood in the middle of the street.

Here are a few more sentences where the subject is preceded by the verb (the verb comes before the subject):

Over the fence jumped the dog.

Into the gaping maws of seven hungry teenagers disappeared the pizza.

If you turn the sentences around, you can easily see what's what.

Implied Subject

Sometimes, in imperative sentences (sentences that make a request or give a command), the subject is not included, it is just implied, assumed, or understood.

Sit down!

Help me!

In these cases, *you* is the implied subject, even though it's not actually stated. In this case, the sentence is complete even though the subject is not stated; an implied subject creates the complete thought.

Subjects in Disguise

Another common error occurs with words that look like they should be verbs, but are not. Remember, parts of speech are defined by how a word is used in the sentence, not by the word itself. For example, *skiing* can be a noun (as in the sport of skiing) or a verb (as in the action of skiing). It all depends on how it is used in the sentence:

Noun: **Skiing is fun.**

Verb: **I was skiing.**

No word with an *-ing* suffix, by itself, can ever be the verb of a sentence. In order to act as a verb, it must be accompanied by an auxiliary verb (*was skiing, am driving, will be eating*). If it stands alone, it may be the subject or have another use in the sentence, but it will never be the verb.

Driving requires concentration.

Driving is a noun here; it serves as the subject in this sentence.

John **was driving the truck.**

Was driving is the verb in this sentence.

No word in its infinitive form (a verb with *to* in front of it, such as *to jump*, *to swim*, *to laugh*) can ever be the verb of a sentence. An infinitive may serve as the subject or have another use in the sentence, but it will never be the verb.

John **likes to drive the truck.**

Likes is the verb in this sentence and *John* is the subject; *to drive the truck* is called an infinitive phrase (and part of the predicate). An infinitive (or infinitive phrase) can have many different functions in a sentence but it is never the main verb.



Subjects and Predicates

A sentence is one complete thought about something or someone; this person or thing is the **subject** of the sentence. The subject contains at least one noun or pronoun and often contains modifiers, or words that tell more about the something or someone. The **predicate** tells about what happened, and it contains at least one verb, and its modifiers (if any).

Here are a few sentences showing the **subject in blue** and the **predicate in red**. You'll notice that the subject contains not just the noun but all the words related to the noun. Likewise, the predicate includes the verb as well as all the words related to the verb.

The dog ran around.

The sun rose slowly.

The quilt was colorful.

Of course, subjects and predicates can be more complex, too. Consider these examples:

The big black dog and the tiny orange cat loved to play together and race wildly around the house.

The beautiful, bright sun rose slowly over the high mountain behind my house.

The gorgeous quilt was burgundy and mauve and won first prize at the county fair.

When you are trying to identify the subject and the predicate in a sentence, ask yourself, “Who or what is doing the action?” That’s the subject. Verbs, which tell about action, tend to be easier to spot than subjects, so it might help to look for the verb first, then the subject. When identifying the subject and predicate, remember to include all the words related to the verb, and all the words related to the subject.

What is the subject in this sentence? Who or what is doing the action?

Shannon runs two miles around the lake every day.

Shannon is the subject in this sentence. Look what happens when we expand the sentence:

My best friend Shannon, who is three years older than I am, runs two miles around the lake every day.

Now what is the subject? *Shannon* and all the words that describe Shannon. What you are left with is the predicate (the verb and all its modifiers):

My best friend Shannon, who is three years older than I am, runs two miles around the lake every day.

Verbs that tell what the subject is, was, or will be are called *verbs of being*. Verbs of being tend to be harder to spot than action verbs because they merely tell what the subject is, rather than what he, she, or it is doing. In the sentence

above, *runs* is an action verb and is the main verb of the sentence—it is the one contained in the predicate. Let’s see what happens when we rearrange the sentence:

My best friend Shannon, who runs two miles around the lake every day, is three years old than I am.

Now the verb *runs* is part of the subject because it describes who or what is doing the action, and the verb of being *is* becomes the main verb of the sentence and part of the predicate.

While this may seem tricky, breaking a sentence down into subject and predicate gets easier with practice. Just use these key questions to help you:

Subject: Who or what is doing the action?

Predicate: What is happening? What is the action or state of being?



Suffixes

A *suffix* is a letter or group of letters added to the end of a word. Just as adding a prefix (which is added to the beginning of a word) changes the meaning of a word, so does adding a suffix.

Here are some examples:

| Base word | Suffix added |
|------------------|---------------------|
| wonder | wonderful |
| touch | touchable |
| shoe | shoeless |
| marvel | marvelous |

You can create many adjectives and adverbs by adding a suffix to a base word. Also, some suffixes are used to change a word's tense or role in the sentence, such as *-ing* and *-ed* (as in *waiting* or *waited*).

Here are some common suffixes and their meanings (there are many more!):

| SUFFIX | MEANING | EXAMPLE |
|---------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| -ful | full of | cheerful graceful |
| -able | able to be | breakable agreeable |
| -less | without | fearless penniless |
| -y | having, being like | dusty smelly |
| -ly | in what manner | loudly quickly |
| -ous | full of | dangerous glamorous |



The Writing Process

Writing is a process that follows specific steps:

- **Brainstorm ideas** and create an outline (in your head or on paper) to organize your ideas.
- **Write a rough draft** that includes all the points you want to include, in the right order.
- **Revise** your paper to make additions, delete or reword passages that are unclear or off-topic, rearrange text, and refine your wording so you are happy with it.
- **Edit** your revised draft to correct errors in punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and grammar.
- **Proofread** your writing to catch any errors in the final version.

Each of these steps is important so let's look at each one separately.

The writing process begins when a writer **brainstorms** ideas to write about, and organizes the ideas into logical order. These ideas are expanded into sentences and paragraphs, and slowly a **rough draft** is created. When your rough draft is finished, you know that most of what you want to say is there, in roughly the right order.

Try not to think of a rough draft as “more work,” but rather as the easy, effortless stage where you have the freedom of capturing your thoughts on paper without worrying about spelling or grammar. Many people enjoy cooking and leave the clean-up for afterwards. Consider your rough draft to be the cooking stage (revising and editing are the clean-up phase). Just as you wouldn’t want to let your cooking burn because you were washing dishes, you don’t want to lose good thoughts because you stop along the way to clean up spelling and punctuation.

The next step is to read what you have written to make sure it says what you want it to. Writing requires **revising** your rough draft. Read your paper aloud. This will help you hear how your words are fitting together. Does your paper express your ideas clearly? Does it stay focused on the topic? Have you accidentally left words out or written something in a way that is confusing or awkward? Revising lets you add any additional information, and rearrange paragraphs (or sentences within a paragraph) so that the information flows in a more logical way. Revising your rough draft creates a much smoother version of your paper.

After revising comes **editing**. This is when you go over your work to correct mistakes. Check that all sentences and proper nouns begin with a capital letter. Notice whether you’ve used a variety of sentence lengths. Check your spelling. Is your paper one long paragraph, or have you broken it down so that each paragraph discusses just one main idea? It can help to read your writing aloud to a friend, family member, or even a pet. Your ear can help catch mistakes that your

eyes can't always find. You might have to read your paper more than once to find and repair everything. Take your time with it!

After you are satisfied that you have done your best editing job, rewrite your rough draft into its final version, making all the corrections. If you are writing by hand, use your best handwriting. Finally, **proofread** your final version to check for any last corrections that need to be made.

If you think that it sounds like you'll have to read your paper over and over before it is finished, you are right. Writers understand that reading what they have written is the only way to improve their work. Writing, reading, revising, reading, editing, reading, and proofing—this is the writing process!