

CAE Writing Test Tips 3

8. Common Mistakes in CAE Writing

GRAMMAR MISTAKES

Most CAE students don't make obvious, basic mistakes like your/you're or its/it's. But they do struggle with things like:

Relative clauses

You need to learn the difference between defining and non-defining relative clauses. Your non-defining clauses need commas, while your defining clauses shouldn't have commas.

I had lunch with my grandfather, **who** is 90 years old. (The second half of the sentence tells you more about my grandfather. It's bonus information, so there has to be a comma.)

I had lunch with my friend **who** lives in Prague. (I am very cool and popular - I have lots of friends. If I say 'I had lunch with my friend' you don't know which friend I mean. So the 'who lives in Prague' clause gives you essential information. Therefore, no comma!)

Note that non-defining pronouns cannot be changed to 'that', so you should never write a comma followed by 'that'. (This is especially a problem for German speakers because in German you **HAVE** to use a comma before 'that'.)

Gerund vs infinitive

Gerund means the -ing form of a verb. This is a tricky part of grammar because there are no rules and you have to learn every verb one by one. English! Argh! Anyway, make sure you know these structures:

I used to live in China (= I lived in China).

I'm used to hearing **German** (= hearing German is normal for me).

I look forward to meeting **you**.

I stopped smoking (= I quit).

I stopped to smoke (= I stopped what I was doing because I wanted to have a cigarette).

I recommend buying **new** computer equipment. (Suggest and advice are also followed by gerunds.)

I recommend **you** buy new computer equipment.

Prepositions

So hard! So many prepositions! So many mistakes! Just learn as many as you can and remember, every single student who has ever taken the CAE exam has struggled with prepositions. You are not alone!

Conditionals

If I get the job I will move to Zurich. (The speaker is confident.)

If I got the job I would move to Zurich. (The speaker is not confident.)

If I had got the job I would have moved to Zurich. (But the speaker didn't get the job and didn't move to Zurich.)

OTHER MISTAKES

Not taking risks

A lot of students always write the same, safe, things they always write. To master advanced vocabulary and structures you have to use advanced vocabulary and structures!

Being boring

It's hard enough to produce a well-structured piece of writing with good vocabulary that fits the content. But remember that the examiners read hundreds and hundreds of essays and most of them are very boring! If you make yours interesting (though the style, unexpectedly good vocabulary, maybe even a joke or two) the examiners will be VERY happy and you will be REWARDED.

9. Frequently Asked Questions

Q - Do I have to use British spelling?

A - No, it doesn't matter. But if you use American spelling, be consistent throughout your writing.

Q - How important is spelling and punctuation?

A - It's pretty important - If you make a trivial mistake it won't be a big deal. If the mistake stops the reader from understanding what you mean then you will lose points.

Q - How important is the word count? What happens if I write too many words?

A - The word count is a guide, not a rule. But if you do the task properly you **will** write about 220-260 words. If you write 300 words then you've probably written lots of stuff you don't need. If you write 200 words you've probably forgotten something.

DO NOT waste time in the exam counting how many words you have written! And never add or remove words just because of the word count - it'll turn out clumsy and weird.

Q - I know I need to use complex sentences to get a good grade, but I'm worried about making mistakes. Is it better to have a simple text with no mistakes?

A - Cambridge says that students who make mistakes while trying to use complex structures will get credit for trying (as long as the mistake doesn't stop the reader from understanding).

Q - My handwriting is terrible! No-one can read it! Will I lose points?

A - No. Your handwriting is not very important. Just make sure it can be read. Also, you don't need to rewrite your text (and you don't have time to rewrite it) - if it's got lots of bits crossed out, don't worry. Every student's writing looks the same!