Common Concerns for ESL/ELL Students
In Editing and Revision

Basic Strategy:
In general, if it is hard to understand the message of your writing because of language or grammar, then you may want to prioritize language/grammar issues in the editing and revision process.

Make a list of your most common errors and prioritize them. Then work through the list tackling one item at a time.

Articles

“A” and “an” signal that the noun modified is indefinite, referring to any member of a group.

"Somebody call a policeman!” This refers to any policeman. We don't need a specific policeman; we need any policeman who is available.

“The” signals that the noun is definite, that it refers to a particular member of a group.

“I was happy to see the policeman who saved my cat!” Here, we’re talking about a particular policeman. Even if we don't know the policeman's name, it's still a particular policeman because it is the one who saved the cat.

Subject/Verb Agreement

In addition to basic subject/verb agreement, you will want to double check adjectives and adverbs to ensure correct forms of each.

When the subject of a sentence is composed of two or more nouns or pronouns connected by and, use a plural verb.

When two or more singular nouns or pronouns are connected by or or nor, use a singular verb.

When a compound subject contains both a singular and a plural noun or pronoun joined by or or nor, the verb should agree with the part of the subject that is nearer the verb.

Do not be misled by a phrase that comes between the subject and the verb. The verb agrees with the subject, not with a noun or pronoun in the phrase.

Nouns such as civics, mathematics, dollars, measles, and news require singular verbs.

Note: the word dollars is a special case. When talking about an amount of money, it requires a singular verb, but when referring to the dollars themselves, a plural verb is required.

Nouns such as scissors, tweezers, trousers, and shears require plural verbs. (There are two parts to these things.)

In sentences beginning with there is or there are, the subject follows the verb. Since there is not the subject, the verb agrees with what follows.

Expressions such as with, together with, including, accompanied by, in addition to, or as well do not change the number of the subject. If the subject is singular, the verb is too.
Verb Tenses

You will want to mainly use the simple past, simple present, and simple future tenses in your academic and professional writing. Here is a list with examples of twelve English verb tenses. The

**Simple Present:** They walk  
**Present Progressive:** They are walking  
**Present Perfect:** They have walked  
**Present Perfect Progressive:** They have been walking  
**Simple Past:** They walked  
**Past Progressive:** They were walking  
**Past Perfect:** They had walked  
**Past Perfect Progressive:** They had been walking  
**Simple Future:** They will walk  
**Future Progressive:** They will be walking  
**Future Perfect:** They will have walked  
**Future Perfect Progressive:** They will have been walking

Idiomatic Expressions

You will want to avoid using idiomatic phrases, especially the more colloquial ones. If you do, make sure to use them correctly. Double check the meaning of any phrases - even native English speakers don’t use idiomatic phrases correctly.

Incorrect: "All intensive purposes"  
Correct: "All intents and purposes"  
Incorrect: "To wet one’s appetite"  
Correct: "To whet one’s appetite"

Incorrect: "All of the sudden"  
Correct: "All of a sudden"

Writing Genres, Writing Styles, Citing Sources

Sometimes particular writing genres may be unfamiliar. If you are unsure of what exactly is expected in a particular type of writing, look up examples and use them as a model.

Similarly, a particular writing style or citation system (eg: APA, MLA) may be unfamiliar. If so, find examples or reference books/websites/handbooks that can help you become familiar with the mechanics or requirements of that style.

For citations, consider whether or not a piece of information is general knowledge or is specifically attributed to a particular person/source. If it comes from a particular source, you should use a citation.

*Materials on articles and subject/verb agreement are selected from Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL). For more in depth explanation of topics, visit [owl.english.purdue.edu](http://owl.english.purdue.edu).*