

For students who learn English as a second language, certain surface errors arise because of translation issues and because certain features of English do not exist in their language (and vice versa). Some general surface errors occur in the writing of Arabic speakers because **spelling in Arabic is phonetic** and **capitalization does not exist**. **Prepositions also pose particular difficulties** as they do for most ESL learners.

Other pattern “errors” common to Arabic speakers who are writing in English are as follows:

Sentences

Coordination of sentences is preferred over subordination; sentences often begin with “and” or “so.”

Sentence boundaries are fluid, and punctuation is used loosely; thus, comma splices occur frequently.

Classic Arabic uses a verb-subject-object construction: “Reading Bob a book” vs. “Bob is reading a book.”

Verbs

Several errors surround auxiliary and modal verbs:

- Auxiliary verbs are often omitted, and “do” does not exist as an auxiliary verb: “We going.” vs. “We were going.” (omitted) OR “You have a brother?” vs. “*Do* you have a brother?”
- Past perfect tense (which is created with “had” and used to express that two different events took place in the past, and one event ended before the second event started) is expressed in Arabic by “be”: “When Susan arrived, Jake *be* left.” vs. “When Susan arrived, Jack had left.”
- The verb “to be” in the present tense is implied: “He smart.” vs. “He is smart.”
- Modal verbs (indicating likelihood, ability, permission, and obligation, such as “can,” “should,” “could,” “might,” “shall,” “would,” and “will”) do not exist: “I get in trouble” vs. “I *should* get in trouble.”
- There is no future tense: “We go to the movies next week.” vs. “We *will* go to the movies next week.”

The third-person singular –s is often omitted: “He speak well.” vs. “He speaks well.”

Infinitives (“to + verb”) are expressed in Arabic by “that:” “I want *that* you stay” vs. “I want you *to* stay.”

¹ Adapted from Ann Raimés and Susan Miller-Cochran, *Keys for Writers*, 7th ed. (Mason, Ohio: Cengage Learning, 2013).

Nouns and Pronouns

Personal pronouns are often repeated after nouns to which they refer: “My father *he* lives in California” vs. “My father lives in California.”

A singular noun is used after a numeral above ten: “He has eleven *cousin*” vs. “He has eleven *cousins*.”

If a proper noun is in a main clause, a pronoun referring to that noun occurs after the verb: “Here is Lisa Smith, who you met *her* last week” vs. “Here is Lisa Smith, who you met last week.”

Relative pronouns make no human/nonhuman distinction (no difference between “who,” “whom,” “whose,” “which,” “that”): “We saw my mother *that* was very nice to all of us.” vs. “We saw my mother, *who* was very nice to all of us.”

Adjectives and Adverbs

Adjectives occur after a noun: “The book interesting long . . .” vs. “the interesting, long book . . .”

Articles

There is no indefinite article (“a,” “an”), only the definite article (“the”): “He is student.” vs. “He is *a* student.”

A definite article (“the”) is used for time (days of the week and some months), along with some place names and several idiomatic expressions: “He went to the library on *the* Tuesday” vs. “He went to the library on Tuesday” OR “He went to *the* Peru” vs. “He went to Peru.”