ESL Sentence Structure

Here are some suggestions for ESL students regarding sentence structure in English:

- Use a linking verb between a subject and complement. For example:
  
  *I am* ready for the trip.

  *Jennifer is* exhausted.

  The students at the University of Alabama *are* very busy.

- Every sentence must have a subject. English, unlike other languages, requires that each sentence have a subject. The exception to this rule is commands; in these sentences, the subject *you* is understood (*Turn right. Don’t smoke.*).

  Our friends are coming over tomorrow for dinner. *They* will bring dessert.

  i. Using “It” as the subject:

  “It” can be used as the subject when describing weather, temperature, time, distance or environment:

  *It* is very windy in Tuscaloosa today.

  In New York, *it* is very cold during the winter.

  *It’s* 3 p.m.

  *It’s* 2 miles from my apartment to campus.

  Out in the country *it’s* very quiet at night.

  “It” is also used in some sentences as a “placeholder” subject, especially in those sentences which have an
infinitive (to live) or noun clause (that he goes to bed early) as the subject:

*It* is exciting to live in a new country.

*It’s* good that he goes to bed early because he has to be at work at 5 a.m.

ii. Using “There” as the subject:

This “placeholder” subject is used when the real subject comes after the verb:

*There* isn’t any food in the refrigerator. (*food* is the subject.)

*There* are too many people in the elevator. (*people* is the subject.)

- Do not repeat the subject, usually a noun, with a pronoun in the same clause:

  The teacher *he* told me to write about a personal experience.

  My classmates *they* always know the answers.

  The grade I got last semester *it* wasn’t that good.

- Do not repeat the topic of the sentence with a pronoun (*my cell phone* is the topic):

  Incorrect: My cell phone *I* lost *it* in the bookstore.

  Correct: I lost my cell phone in the bookstore.

- Do not repeat an object or an adverb in an adjective clause:

  Adjective clauses begin with relative adverbs (*when, where*) or relative pronouns (*who, whom, whose, which, that*). Other pronouns
should not be used to repeat relative pronouns within a clause, because the relative pronoun is the subject of the clause:

Incorrect: The fans watched the game that it was on TV.
Correct: The fans watched the game that was on TV.

Relative adverbs should not be repeated with other adverbs in the same clause:

Incorrect: The apartment where I live there is very close to campus.
Correct: The apartment where I live is very close to campus.

- Do not use other linking words in a sentence with although or because.

Using other thinking words in a sentence with although or because often has the effect of redundancy:

Incorrect: Although my classes are easy, but my grades are not very good.
Correct: Although my classes are easy, my grades are not very good.

Incorrect: Because my neighbors are very loud, therefore I cannot fall asleep at night.
Correct: Because my neighbors are very loud, I cannot fall asleep at night.

The alternative--leaving out because or although and inserting the other linking word--is also correct:

My classes are easy, but my grades are not very good.

My neighbors are very loud; therefore, I cannot fall asleep at night.
• Do not put an adverb between a verb and its direct object.

Adverbs can be placed at the beginning or end of a sentence, before or after the verb, or between the helping verb and the main verb. However, adverbs cannot appear between the verb and its direct object:

Correct: *Quietly*, the class listened to the teacher’s lecture.

Correct: He wrote his paper for history *quickly*.

Correct: Kim *never* comes to class late.

Correct: The athletes are *constantly* practicing and training.

Correct: This professor has *regularly* given surprises quizzes.

Correct: Final grades don’t *always* reflect the amount of effort a student has put forth.

But…

Incorrect: The server carried *carefully* the plates of food.

Correct: The server *carefully* carried the plates of food.

Incorrect: Our professor assigns *never* term papers.

Correct: Our professor *never* assigns term papers.