



Uni-edit English Writing Tip: Verbs: Consists of / comprises / composed of / constitutes / make up / includes

Difficulty: Medium

Contain, consist, compose, constitute, comprise...what these verbs have in common is the Latin root “com-“, which means “to put together”. They describe the relationship of parts to the whole, or whole to parts. They can be used interchangeably in some cases, but cannot in others. Let’s look at the usages of each word, with attention to active and passive voice.

What’s an Exhaustive List? What’s a Non-Exhaustive List?

The idea of an exhaustive vs. non-exhaustive list is crucial to using the verbs correctly.

Exhaustive list - report all the items

Non-exhaustive list - report some but not all of the items

Exhaustive list: **My siblings consist of three brothers.**

This means I have no sisters.

Non-exhaustive list: **My siblings include three brothers.**

This means I have one or more sisters.

Choose the right verb

Some verbs are used for exhaustive lists. Some verbs are used for non-exhaustive lists. You must choose the right verb for the situation.

Non-exhaustive verbs: include / contain

Include

The meanings are essentially equivalent.

The whole includes the parts; the parts are included in the whole.

The whole contains the parts; the parts are contained in the whole.

Correct: **Asia includes the countries of China, Japan, and Korea.**

(It also includes other countries.)

Incorrect: **North America includes the countries of the USA, Canada, and Mexico.**

(It does not include other countries.)

Contain

The whole contains the parts; the parts are contained in the whole.

Correct: [The report contains statistics about the labor market from 2008–2014.](#)

(It also includes other statistics.)

Exhaustive verbs: consist of / compose / comprise / constitute / make up

Consist of

When you write 'consist of', you must write the entire list. The whole consists of the parts.

Correct: [North America consists of three countries: the USA, Canada, and Mexico.](#)

Incorrect: [Asia consists of China, Japan, and Korea.](#)

(There are more than these three countries in Asia.)

By the way, “is consisted of” is incorrect English.

Compose

When you write 'compose', you must write the entire list. The whole is composed of the parts.

Correct: [The nicotinic acetylcholine receptor is composed of five subunits: the muscle-type one is composed of two alpha1, one beta1, one delta, and one epsilon subunits.](#)

By the way, when using 'compose' with this meaning, the active voice is less common, perhaps because active-voice “compose” has another meaning, which is “to write (an artistic work)”: e.g., Mozart composed his first symphony at the age of eight.

Comprise

When you write 'comprises', you must write the entire list.

Standard usage is “the whole comprises the parts”. In modern times, the usage “the whole is comprised of the parts” is common. However, since some English style authorities think the latter usage is mistaken, use it at your own risk. An alternative like “consists of” is uncontroversial.

Correct: [A simple circuit comprises a source of voltage \(e.g. a battery\), a conductive path \(e.g. a wire\), and a resistor \(e.g. a lightbulb\).](#)

Alternative correct: [A simple circuit ~~is comprised of~~ **consists of** a source of voltage \(e.g. a battery\), a conductive path \(e.g. a wire\), and a resistor \(e.g. a lightbulb\).](#)

Make up

When you write 'make up' or 'made up of', you must write the entire list.

The parts make up the whole; the whole is made up of the parts. Active voice and passive voice are equally common.

Correct: [Seeds and fern spores make up the finch's diet.](#)

Correct: [The finch's diet is made up of seeds and fern spores.](#)

Constitute

When you write 'constitute', you must write the entire list.

The parts constitute the whole; the whole is constituted of the parts. The active voice is more common than the passive voice.

Correct: [Automobile exhaust constitutes a large proportion of total greenhouse gas emissions.](#)

Explanation: Here, in grammatical terms, the 'whole' is the 'large proportion of total greenhouse gas emissions', not 'total greenhouse gas emissions'.

END OF TIP