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Scientific Writing Resources

Words and phrases that can confuse

(a bit of grammatical help)

To Be

To Be like





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The verb to **Be** can be an **Auxiliary** verb and a **Main** verb. However, we need to understand its meaning and not to guess. So the question: How are you? Means your health, the condition of your body and organs. Very well; we answer. But what if we want to know the temperament of a person or appearance. Here we need another construction: What is he like? **Like = similar**. So, what is he similar to? This asks about how he looks, exterior appearance or his temperament. Thus we now have: interior, exterior.

- **How is your sister? (*Inside*)** Very well, thanks
- **What is your sister like? (*outside/ what we see/character*)** She is tall, slim with long dark hair.

In English, we use these two questions to ask about many things.



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- **How were the cells?**

No very good, many had died and others were not viable.

- **What were the cells like?**

They were long with rounded ends.

- **How was the patient?**

No very well, low blood pressure, anaemic and undernourished.

- **What was the patient like?**

90 years old, 1m 55 tall, slight build, short white hair.