

Common Grammar Mistakes

Writers are often faced with challenges concerning grammar. The best ways to overcome these challenges are to learn the rules and to practice. When there are certain grammatical mistakes that keep reappearing, they should be focused on specifically. This handout will review the basics and should help you learn some rules.

Basic Subject/Verb Agreement

A subject and verb must match in number and person. Singular subjects do not end in *-s* or *-es*, but plural subjects do end in *-s* or *-es*. It is the opposite for verbs; singular verbs do end in *-s* or *-es* and plural verbs do not end in *-s* or *-es*.

Examples:

- That **student agrees** that **professors assign** too much reading.
- College **students read** all day and half the night.
- **Buses carry** students from home to class and from class to work.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer's Reference* on pages 193-202.

Wrong or Missing Verb Ending

Sometimes, it is easy to forget verb endings like *-s*, *-es*, *-ed*, or *-d* because they are not always pronounced when spoken. The proper ending must be added to the correct verb tense.

Examples:

- Eliot ^{uses} ~~use~~ feline imagery throughout the poem.
- Nobody ^{imagined} ~~imagine~~ he would actually become president.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer's Reference* on pages 202-03 and 208-09.

Sentence Fragment

A sentence fragment usually lacks a subject or a verb, or it begins with a subordinating word.

Examples:

- **Lacks subject:** Marie Antoinette spent huge sums of money. ^{Her extravagance helped} ~~Helped~~ bring on the French Revolution.
- **Lacks complete verb:** The old aluminum boat ^{was} ~~sitting~~ on its trailer. ^{, where}
- **Begins with subordinating word:** We returned to the drugstore. ~~Where~~ ^{we} waited for the rest of the gang.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer's Reference* on pages 238-44.

Run-on Sentences

Run-on sentences are independent clauses that are written without any punctuation between them. You can correct a run-on sentence by dividing it into separate sentences, adding a comma and coordinating conjunction, or a semicolon (or, if appropriate, a colon or a dash). A semicolon may be used alone or with a transitional expression.

Examples:

- The current was swift ^{He} ~~he~~ could not swim to shore.
- Klee's paintings seem simple ^{but} ~~they~~ are very sophisticated.
- She doubted the value of meditation ^{; nevertheless,} ~~she~~ decided to try it once.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer's Reference* on pages 245-51.

Missing or Misplaced Possessive Apostrophe

To show ownership, either an apostrophe and an –s or an apostrophe alone is added to the word representing the thing that possesses the other. An apostrophe and –s are used for singular nouns, indefinite pronouns, and plural nouns. For plural nouns ending in –s, such as *siblings* or *mothers*, only the apostrophe is used.

Examples:

- Overambitious parents can be very harmful to a ^{child's} ~~childs~~ well-being.
- Ron Guidry was once one of the ~~Yankee's~~ ^{Yankees'} most electrifying pitchers.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer's Reference* on pages 318-19.

Its / It's Confusion

The word *its* means “of it” or “belonging to it.” *It's* is the shortened form of “it is” or “it has.”

Examples:

- The car is lying on ~~it's~~ ^{its} side in the ditch.
- ~~It's~~ a white 1986 Buick.
- ~~It's~~ been lying there for two days.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer's Reference* on pages 320-21.

Word Usage

If a writer is not careful, he or she can often make mistakes when choosing words. Writers must be certain that the word chosen for the text has the correct meaning.

Examples:

(accept, except) The verb *accept* means “agree to” or “receive.” As a preposition, *except* means “excluding” or “leaving out.” As a verb, *except* means “exclude” or “leave out.”

- The workers wanted to **accept** management's offer **except** for one detail: They wanted the limit on overtime **excepted** from the contract.

(affect, effect) As a verb, *affect* means “cause a change in; influence.” As a noun, *effect* means “result or conclusion”; as a verb, *effect* means “to bring about.”

- Loud music **affects** people's hearing for life, so many bands have **effected** changes to lower the volume. Many fans, however, do not care about the harmful **effects** of high-decibel levels.

(their, there, they're) *Their* is a possessive pronoun. *There* means “in that place” or is part of an expletive construction. *They're* is a contraction of “they are.”

- **They're** going to **their** accounting class in the building over **there** near the library. Do you know that **there** are twelve sections of Accounting 101?

See also “Glossary of usage” in *A Writer's Reference* on pages 151-64.

Wrong or Missing Preposition

You must use a particular preposition to express a particular meaning. Also, because most prepositions are short and are not stressed or pronounced clearly, they are sometimes accidentally left out of writing.

Examples:

- Nixon compared the United States ~~with~~ ^{to} a “pitiful, helpless giant.”
- Finally, she refused to comply ~~to~~ ^{with} army regulations.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer's Reference* on pages 289-90.

Unnecessary Shift in Tense

Verb tense shifts confuse the reader and must be avoided. Do not jump from one time period to another, such as from past to present or from present to future.

Examples:

- Lucy was watching the great blue heron take off when she ~~slips and falls~~ ^{slipped and fell} into the swamp.
- Each team of detectives is assigned to three or four cases at a time. They ~~will~~ ^{will} investigate only those leads that seem most promising.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer's Reference* on pages 130-31.

Unnecessary Shift in Pronoun

Pronoun shifts occur when a pronoun used to refer to someone or something shifts to another for no reason. The most common shift is from *one* to *you* or *I*.

Examples:

- When one first sees a painting by Georgia O'Keeffe, ~~you are~~ ^{one is} impressed by a sense of power and stillness.
- If we had known about the ozone layer, ~~you~~ ^{we} would have banned aerosol sprays years ago.

Vague Pronoun Reference

Pronouns like *he*, *she*, *it*, *they*, *this*, *that*, or *which* should refer to a specific word or words elsewhere in the sentence or previous sentence. When the pronoun could refer to more than one word, the sentence is unclear. The sentence is also unclear when the pronoun refers to a word that is implied but not stated.

Possible reference to more than one word

Before Mary Grace physically and verbally assaulted Mrs. Tarpin, ^{the latter} ~~she~~ was a judgmental woman who created her own ranking system of people.

Reference implied but not stated

The troopers burned an Indian camp as a result of the earlier attack. This ^{destruction of the camp} ~~was~~ the cause of the war.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer's Reference* on pages 221-22.

Lack of Agreement between Pronoun and Antecedent

Most pronouns are used to replace other words so that they do not have to be repeated. The word that the pronoun replaces is called its **antecedent**. Pronouns must agree with, or match, their antecedents in gender and number.

Examples:

- Every one of the puppies thrived in ^{its} ~~their~~ new home.
- Neither Jane nor Susan brought ^{her} ~~their~~ husband to the party.
- The team's players frequently changed ^{their} ~~its~~ positions to get varied experience.
- Every student must provide ^{or her} ~~his~~ own uniform.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer's Reference* on pages 217-21.

Missing Comma in a Series

A comma is required between three or more parallel words, phrases, or clauses that appear consecutively in a sentence.

Examples:

- Sharks eat mostly **squid, shrimp, crabs, and other fish.**
- You must learn to **talk to the earth, smell it, and squeeze it in your hands.**

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer's Reference* on pages 296 and 308-09.

Missing Comma after an Introductory Element

If there is a small pause between the introductory element (word, phrase, or clause) and the main part of the sentence, the pause is most often signaled by a comma.

Examples:

- To tell the truth, I have always loved learning about commas.
- Frankly, I love everything about grammar and punctuation.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer's Reference* on pages 294-95 and 304.

Missing Comma in a Compound Sentence

The two independent clauses of a compound sentence may be linked by either a semicolon or a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, so, yet, nor, or, for*). A comma is usually placed before the coordinating conjunction to indicate a pause between the two thoughts.

Examples:

- The words “I do” may sound simple, **but** they mean a complex commitment for life.
- We wish dreamily upon a star, **and** then we look down to see that we have stepped in the mud.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer’s Reference* on pages 293 and 379-80.

Comma Splice

A comma splice occurs when two or more independent clauses are joined together with only a comma between them. You can fix the comma splice with a semicolon, a coordinating conjunction, or a period.

Examples:

- Westward migration had passed Wyoming by/[;] even the discovery of gold in nearby Montana failed to attract settlers.
- I was strongly attracted to her, [^]for she had special qualities.
- They always had roast beef for Thanksgiving/[^]This was a family tradition.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer’s Reference* on pages 245-51.

Missing Comma(s) with a Nonrestrictive Element

A nonrestrictive element is **not essential** to the meaning of the sentence; it could be deleted without destroying the sentence’s basic meaning. Instead of deleting it, you must set off the nonrestrictive element with a comma or commas. Nonessential elements are **not essential**, but punctuation **is**.

Examples:

- Marina, **who was the president of the club**, was first to speak.
- Louis was forced to call a session of the Estates General, **which had not met for 175 years**.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer’s Reference* on pages 298-302.

Unnecessary Comma(s) with a Restrictive Element

A restrictive element is a word, phrase, or clause that is **essential** to the sentence’s meaning and must **not** be set off with a comma or commas.

Examples: (*All the commas below should be removed.*)

- An arrangement/~~for~~ orchestra/~~was~~ made by Ravel.
- People/~~who~~ wanted to preserve wilderness areas/~~opposed~~ the plan to privatize national parks.
- Shakespeare’s tragedy/~~Othello~~/~~deals~~ with the dangers of jealousy.

All of the above examples are taken from *The New St. Martin’s Handbook*.

Principal Misuses of Commas

- **Don't use a comma after a subject or verb:**
Incorrect: Anyone with breathing problems, should not exercise during smog alerts.
Correct: Anyone with breathing problems should not exercise during smog alerts.
- **Don't separate a pair of words, phrases, or subordinate clauses joined by *and*, *or*, or *nor*:**
Incorrect: Asthmatics are affected by ozone, and sulfur oxides.
Correct: Asthmatics are affected by ozone and sulfur oxides.
- **Don't use a comma after *and*, *but*, *although*, *because*, or another conjunction:**
Incorrect: Smog is dangerous and, sometimes even fatal.
Correct: Smog is dangerous and sometimes even fatal.
- **Don't set off essential elements:**
Incorrect: Even people, who are healthy, should be careful.
Correct: Even people who are healthy should be careful.
Incorrect: Bruce Springsteen's song, "Born in the USA," became an anthem.
Correct: Bruce Springsteen's song "Born in the USA" became an anthem.
- **Don't set off a series:**
Incorrect: Cars, factories, and even bakeries, contribute to smog.
Correct: Cars, factories, and even bakeries contribute to smog.
- **Don't set off an indirect quotation:**
Incorrect: Experts say, that the pollutant ozone is especially damaging.
Correct: Experts say that the pollutant ozone is especially damaging.

(from *The Little, Brown Handbook* 440)

See also "Unnecessary commas" in *A Writer's Reference* on pages 307-12.