

Common Grammar Errors

Below are examples of grammar errors that most people make, and explanations for how to correct them when you find them. You may consider that the content of the paper is more important than the mechanics, but correcting the grammar errors in your paper is a sure way to improve it.

Ambiguous Pronouns

We all know how pronouns are supposed to work: they take the place of proper nouns (e.g. “she” instead of Susan Sontag, “he” instead of John Berger). The problem occurs when there are multiple proper nouns to which your pronoun could refer. In that case, you need to be careful to be as specific as possible to avoid confusing the reader.

- **AMBIGUOUS:** “Mary and Martha are going to her house.” Are they going to Mary’s house or to Martha’s house? How is the reader supposed to know?
- **CLEAR:** “Mary and Martha are going to Martha’s house.”
- **AMBIGUOUS:** “Berger discusses what reproductions do to the original artwork and basically says that it is wrong.” What is “it”?
- **CLEAR:** “Berger sees no value in reproductions, and says that they destroy the uniqueness of the original.” If you can avoid using words such as “it” and “thing” altogether, you will find that your writing gets clearer and clearer.

Comma Usage

You may have learned that you should use a comma to represent a pause. This idea is misleading and will cause you to place commas where they do not belong. You use a comma to fill the following grammatical functions:

- separate items in a list (I went to the store to buy brushes, watercolors, paper and an easel.)
- join an independent and a dependent clause (I woke up with a gasp, leaving my strange dream unfinished.)
- set off introductory or interruptive phrase (As always, I waited until the last minute to study. One of my favorite authors, Octavia Butler, broke down the gender-color barrier in science fiction writing.)
- punctuate dates, cities and states (December 25, 2008. Philadelphia, PA.)
- combine with conjunctive words to create complex sentences using two or more independent clauses (The film *Twilight* made plenty of money, so the producers are going to make the next book from the series into a film.)
- to separate certain adjectives. If you can insert the word “and” between the adjectives and maintain a logical structure, you can use a comma. (the tall, handsome stranger)

Incomplete Sentences/ Fragments

An incomplete sentence is usually the result of writing exactly what we’re thinking. Example: “I have to go to the store today. Need to pick up apples and bananas.” That second sentence is incomplete; it’s missing a subject. As you read over your paper, ask yourself who is doing what in each sentence. If you can’t come up with a full answer,

you have an incomplete sentence. A fragment is a dependent clause, a list, a phrase or any piece of a sentence that does not form a complete sentence on its own.

- FRAGMENT: The rain in Spain falls. mainly, on the plain.
- COMPLETE SENTENCE: The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.
- FRAGMENT: Because they both use death as a theme.
- COMPLETE SENTENCE: We can compare Sylvia Plath to Emily Dickinson because they both use death as a theme.

Passive Sentences

Passive sentences, while not technically wrong, can be confusing and misleading. Active sentences are clearer, and therefore stronger. A passive sentence is one in which the subject is either lost somewhere in the sentence or is not there at all.

- PASSIVE: The work didn't get done
- ACTIVE: I didn't do the work.
- PASSIVE: It was said in the essay that reproductions destroy the uniqueness of original paintings.
- ACTIVE: Berger states that reproductions destroy the uniqueness of original paintings.

Run-on Sentences

Run-on sentences fuse independent clauses without correct punctuation. The only ways to correct a run-on sentence are to break it into smaller sentences using end-punctuation (periods, question marks, exclamation points), use a semicolon or use a comma ALONG with a conjunction word.

- RUN-ON: Sontag has a problem with cameras she compares them to weapons.
- CORRECTED: Sontag has a problem with cameras. She compares them to weapons.
- RUN-ON: Bordo says that magazines don't mean her when they talk about women her age who are beautiful they mean actresses who have had plastic surgery.
- CORRECTED: Bordo says that magazines don't mean her when they talk about women her age who are beautiful; they mean actresses who have had plastic surgery.
- RUN-ON: Berger writes that reproductions de-value the original, in fact they make the original even more unique.
- CORRECTED: Berger writes that reproductions de-value the original, but in fact, they make the original even more unique.

Verb Tenses

Use the same verb tense throughout a sentence unless you have a valid reason for switching (for example, if the action in one clause is conditional: If it **rains** [present tense] today, then I **will** [future tense] not go camping tomorrow.) Make sure that your

verb tense corresponds to the time period about which you are writing. When you write about a literary text, use the present tense, because the text itself always exists.

- INCORRECT: Since we're in a recession, we had to be more careful with money.
- CORRECT: Since we're in a recession, we have to be more careful with money.
OR: Since we entered a recession, we've had to be more careful with money.
- INCORRECT: In the past, countries fight wars to gain control of territories.
- CORRECT: In the past, countries fought wars to gain control of territories.
- INCORRECT: In Act I of *Troilus and Cressida*, Troilus said that Cressida's beauty outshined Helen's.
- CORRECT: In Act I of *Troilus and Cressida*, Troilus says Cressida's beauty outshines Helen's.

Misused Homonyms

Homonyms are words that sound alike but are spelled differently and have different meanings.

- **there** (place, location: I left the book over there.); **their** (possession: It's their home.); and **they're** (contraction meaning "they are": They're coming over for the holidays.)
- **it's** (contraction meaning "it is": It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas) and **its** (possession: The dog ate its food.)
- **know** (to have knowledge: I know what I'm doing.) and **no** (negative response: No, I don't want to talk about grammar anymore.); **knew** (*had* knowledge: I knew we were going to keep talking about grammar) and **new** (opposite of old: It's time to introduce a new subject.)