

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 in 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.
- The red double-decker **bus carries** tourists throughout London.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer's Reference* (AWR) on pages 375-83.

Wrong or Missing Verb Ending

Sometimes, it is easy to forget verb endings such as *-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.
- The professor often ^{discusses} ~~discuss~~ the meaning of imagery in Shakespeare's plays.
- Nobody ^{imagined} ~~imagine~~ he would actually become president.
- The students ^{asked} ~~ask~~ the college to provide healthier food options in the cafeteria.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer's Reference* on p. 388-89.

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 pp. 415-21.

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 pp. 422-28.

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 that do not end in –s. 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.
- It’s ^{anybody’s} ~~anybodies’~~ guess as to whether we’ll have a pop quiz tomorrow.
- ^{Children’s} ~~Childrens~~ Halloween costumes can range from adorable to hideous.
- Ron Guidry was once one of the ^{Yankees’} ~~Yankee’s~~ most electrifying pitchers.
- The ^{Stearns’} ~~Stearns~~ beautiful home is made from western yellow flagstone.

Additional information and examples can be found in *AWR* on pp. 495-97.

Its / It’s Confusion

The possessive pronoun *its* means “of it” or “belonging to it.” The contraction *it’s* is the shortened form of “it is” or “it has.” Here’s a memory trick you can use: Just as you would not use an apostrophe with “hers” or “his,” you also would not use one with “its” to show ownership.

Examples:

- The car is lying on ~~it’s~~ ^{its} side in the ditch. (The possessive pronoun *its* = the car’s side.)
- It’s a white 1986 Buick. (The contraction *it’s* = it is.)
- It’s been lying there for two days. (The contraction *it’s* = it has.)

Additional information and examples can be found in *AWR* on pp. 497 & 512.

Incorrect or Missing Preposition

Prepositions express unique meanings; use the correct one for your purpose. Also, because some prepositions are short and are not pronounced clearly, they can be accidentally left out of writing.

Examples:

- Nixon compared the United States ^{to} ~~with~~ a “pitiful, helpless giant.”
- Finally, she refused to comply ^{with} ~~to~~ army regulations.
- Children show curiosity ^{about} ~~on~~ how things work at a very young age.

Additional information and examples can be found in *AWR* on pp. 462-65.

Unnecessary Shift in Verb 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 ^{slipped and fell} ~~slips and falls~~ into the swamp.
- Each team of detectives is assigned to three or four cases at a time. They ~~will~~ investigate only those leads that seem the most promising.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer's Reference* on pp. 323-24.

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, ^{one is} ~~you are~~ impressed by a sense of power and stillness.
- If **we** had known about the ozone layer, ^{we} ~~you~~ would have banned aerosol sprays years ago.
- After **Maria** arrived home from the store, ^{she} ~~they~~ realized ^{she} ~~they~~ had forgotten to buy yogurt.

Additional information and examples can be found in *AWR* on pp. 321-22 & 325.

Vague Pronoun Reference

Pronouns such as *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.

Examples:

- **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 system of ranking 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 *AWR* on pp. 400-02.

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 in 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 his ^{or her} ~~own~~ uniform.

Additional information and examples can be found in *AWR* on pp. 396-99.

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**.
- The French bistro Le Michel offers a choice of three entrees on Friday nights, **coq au vin, lamb cassoulet, or beef bourguignon**.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer's Reference* on p. 475.

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. The pause usually indicates the place where the independent clause begins. As a test, cover up the part of the sentence you think might be the introductory element. The part that comes after should be able to stand alone as its own sentence. Transitions should also be followed by commas.

Examples:

- To tell the truth, I have always loved learning about commas.
- Although Brendan never thought of himself as a good writer, he found his grammar skills improving after taking an online writing class.
- Frankly, I love everything about grammar and punctuation.
- Furthermore, this comma rule requires that commas be placed immediately after transitions.

Additional information and examples can be found in *AWR* on p. 474.

Missing Comma in a Compound Sentence

The two independent clauses of a compound sentence may be linked by either a semicolon or by a comma and a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*). Always use a comma **before fanboys** to join two independent clauses.

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.
- The fog rolled in, **so** the sky was gray and gloomy.
- The final exam in chemistry was tough, **yet** I made an 'A' in the class.

Additional information and examples can be found in *AWR* on p. 473 & 552-53.

Commas in Complex Sentences

A complex sentence consists of one independent clause and at least one dependent (subordinate) clause. **When the dependent clause appears first**, it is followed by a comma. A comma is not used **when the independent clause comes first**.

Principal Misuses of Commas

- **Don't use a comma to separate a verb from its subject:**
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 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*, 12th ed., 462)

See also "Unnecessary commas" in *A Writer's Reference* on pp. 485-88.