10 Common Grammatical Errors and How to Fix Them

1. Agreement Errors

The subject and verb in a sentence must agree in number (singular vs. plural) and person (first, second, or third person).

Pronouns need to agree with their antecedents in number and person.

A. Subjects and verbs must agree

- ✗ The **books** in the box **is** for sale.
- ✓ The **books** in the box **are** for sale.

Note: the subject in the sentence is "books". "Books" is plural and the verb in the sentence is "to be".

B. Pronouns must agree with their antecedents

- ✗ Each **student** collected **their** library card.
- ✓ Each **student** collected **his or her** library card.
- ✓ All the **students** collected **their** library card.

C. Pronouns must agree with each other

- ✗ Once **one** has read the article, **you** have to answer the questions.
- ✓ Once **one** has read the article, one has to answer the questions.

2. Comma Splices

Joining two independent clauses with only a comma creates a comma splice.

Adding periods, semicolons, a comma and a coordinating conjunction, or a semicolon and a conjunctive adverb can fix a comma splice.

Example: Comma Splice

- ✗ The politician gave his **speech, the** crowd cheered and applauded.

"The politician gave his speech" and "The crowd cheered and applauded" are independent clauses.

Fix a comma splice using a period (.)

- ✗ The politician gave his **speech, the** crowd cheered and applauded.
- ✓ The politician gave his **speech. The** crowd cheered and applauded.

Fix a comma splice using a semicolon (;)

- ✗ The politician gave his **speech, the** crowd cheered and applauded.
- ✓ The politician gave his **speech; the** crowd cheered and applauded.

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Fix a comma splice using a comma and a coordinating conjunction

- ✘ The politician gave his **speech, the** crowd cheered and applauded.
- ✔ The politician gave his **speech, and the** crowd cheered and applauded.

Common Coordinating Conjunctions
- And
- But
- Or

Fix a comma splice using a semicolon and a conjunctive adverb

- ✘ The book was **interesting, the** conclusion was very abrupt.
- ✔ The book was **interesting; however, the** conclusion was very abrupt.

Common Conjunctive Adverbs
- Also
- Therefore
- Then
- Consequently
- Finally
- Furthermore
- However
- Otherwise

3. Word Choice

Avoid using words that you don't understand.

If you don't know the meaning of a word, look it up. Sometimes words have different meanings depending on the context in which they are used.

Example:

- ✘ An examination of the current literature will help **distill** this myth.
- ✔ An examination of the current literature will help **dispel** this myth.

4. Misplaced Modifiers

A modifier is a word that describes or limits another word. A misplaced modifier is placed incorrectly in a sentence. It changes the meaning of a wrong word and alters the author's meaning.

A. Squinting Modifier

A squinting modifier affects more than one word in the sentence.

- ✘ The student being taught **carefully** listened to the professor

Is the student being taught carefully? Is the student listening carefully?

Fix the squinting modifier by changing its position:

- ✓ The student being taught listened **carefully** to the professor.
- ✓ The student being **carefully** taught listened to the professor.

B. Dangling Modifier

A dangling modifier affects a word that does not appear in the sentence.

- ✗ Watching the sunset, the sky was breathtaking.

What is "watching the sunset"?

Fix this dangling modifier by adding a subject:

- ✓ Watching the sunset, **I** thought the sky was breathtaking.
- ✓ **I** watched the sunset and thought the sky was breathtaking.

5. Possessive Case

Apostrophes are often added to the end of a word to show possession. However, this is not always the case.

Check out each of these examples for the different ways possession can be shown.

Words that do NOT end with "s"

Add "apostrophe s" ('s) to the end of the noun.

- ✗ This is Johns house.
- ✓ This is John**'s** house.

Singular nouns that end with "s"

Add an apostrophe (') or "apostrophe s" ('s) to the end of the noun.

- ✓ The bus' tire is flat
- ✓ The bus's tire is flat.

Plural nouns

Add an apostrophe (') to the end of the word.

- ✓ These are the boys' shirts.

The above sentence means that the shirts belong to many boys.

"Its" versus "it's"

"Its" is the possessive form of "it".

"It's" is the contraction of "it is".

- ✗ The company held it's annual party in June.

This sentence actually says: The company held it is annual party in June.

✓ The company held its annual party in June.

6. Pronoun Reference

The word that pronoun replaces is called an "antecedent". For example:

"Jester" can be the antecedent for "he" or "him".

"Shahad" can be the antecedent for "she" or "her".

"The table" can be the antecedent for "it".

"The books" can be the antecedent for "they" or "them".

Don't overuse the pronoun "this"
  ✗ Most of the class earned a passing grade on the exam; however, only a few students did well on the essay. **This** caused concern for the professor.

You can't tell what "this" is referring to. Is the professor concerned that most of the class passed the exam or that only a few students did well on the essay?

  ✓ Most of the class earned a passing grade on the exam; however, only a few students did well on the essay. **This inconsistency** caused concern for the professor.

Ensure the pronoun only refers to one antecedent
  ✗ Doris told Shirley that her watch was broken.

Whose watch is broken? Is it Doris' or Shirley's?

  ✓ Doris told Shirley, "My watch is broken."

Don't overuse the pronoun "it"
  ✗ **In the report, it states** that the reign of King George III was a prosperous time for England.
  ✓ **The report states** that the reign of King George III was a prosperous time for England.

7. Punctuation

The Comma
  • A mild separator used to separate words, phrases, and clauses from each other when no heavier mark is required.

Use commas to separate items in a series of three or more
  ✗ I love to eat **pineapples apples oranges and raspberries.**
  ✓ I love to eat **pineapples, apples, oranges, and raspberries.**

Use commas between two coordinate adjectives that modify the same noun
  ✗ The speaker delivered an **insightful dynamic** speech.

- ✓ The speaker delivered an **insightful, dynamic** speech.

Use commas between independent clauses joined by coordinating conjunctions
- ✗ The sun was **shining but** the air was very cold.
- ✓ The sun was **shining, but** the air was very cold.

Coordinating conjunctions include words like: and, but, so, nor, for, yet, or.

Use commas after an introductory element
- ✗ **In the spring** I will plant my garden.
- ✓ **In the spring,** I will plant my garden.

Introductory elements include: clauses, phrases, and transitional expressions.

Use commas for non-restrictive elements in a sentence
- ✗ My friend who has brown hair called me last night.
- ✓ My **friend, who** has brown **hair, called** me last night.

Non-restrictive elements are descriptors that provide additional non-essential information.

Do NOT use commas to separate a verb from its subject
- ✗ The **dogs, are** jumping over lazy foxes.
- ✓ The dogs are jumping over lazy foxes.

Do NOT use commas with restrictive elements in a sentence
- ✗ Many provinces re-test **drivers, who** are over **sixty-five, to** check their driving competency.
- ✓ Many provinces re-test drivers who are over sixty-five to check their driving competency.

Restrictive elements are descriptors that provide essential information. You need to specify the type of driver because not all of them are re-tested.

The Semi-colon
- A heavy separator, often equivalent to a period.

Semi-colons are used to connect independent clauses that are closely related in meaning.

Use semi-colons between independent clauses closely related in meaning
- ✗ The sky turned **grey, the** wind died suddenly.
- ✓ The sky turned **grey; the** wind died suddenly.

Use semi-colons between independent clauses when the second one starts with a conjunctive adverb or transitional expression.
- ✗ The man entered the **shop however,** he did not buy anything.

✓ The man entered the **shop; however,** he did not buy anything.

The Colon
- A full stop that draws attention to the words that follow

Colons commonly introduce a list or a quotation. They can only be used at the end of an independent clause.

Use colons to introduce a list after an independent clause
- ✗ There are three parts to this **essay an** introduction, a body, and a conclusion.
- ✓ There are three parts to this **essay: an** introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

Use colons to introduce a quotation after an independent clause
- ✗ Hamlet's speech in the graveyard speaks to the fragility of **life "Alas**, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio."
- ✓ Hamlet's speech in the graveyard speaks to the fragility of **life: "Alas**, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio."

8. Passive Voice

"Voice" tells the reader whether a subject is acting or is being acted upon.

The active voice shows the subject as the doer of the action. Using the active voice promotes good sentence structure.

In contrast, the passive voice shows that the subject is being acted upon.

Generally, using the active voice is preferred, but there are cases where you should be writing in the passive voice. For instance, scientific writing often uses the passive voice.

Passive Voice Structure
["to be" conjugation] + [past participle of desired verb] + by

Let's say we want to write this sentence using the passive voice:

Active Voice: The cat **ate** the cake.

The cat – doer of the action

Ate – the action

Passive Voice: The cake **was eaten by** the cat.

9. Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments look like sentences, but they are actually incomplete.

Often sentence fragments are missing a subject or a verb, or they begin with a subordinating word that turns them into a dependent clause.

Sentence fragment: Missing a subject
- ✗ Went out to play.
- ✓ **The child** went out to play.

Sentence fragment: Missing a verb
- ✗ The girl in her house.
- ✓ The girl **stayed** in her house.

Sentence fragment: Dependent clause
- ✗ Because it was raining very hard.
- ✓ Because it was raining very hard, the car skidded on the road.

10. Wordiness

"Wordiness" occurs when you use empty words or phrases that do not contribute to the meaning of the sentence.

Remember, a sentence should express only one idea or a closely linked set of ideas.

Example:
- ✗ Although there are many humorous moments in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and there are many things which are satiric, there are also some important points to be made about Victorian England, namely how the upper classes were extremely pretentious and often they were very superficial.
- — Although there are many humorous and satiric elements in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the play also makes a serious statement about the pretension and superficiality of Victorian upper-class society.
- ✓ Through the use of humour and satire in his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde makes a serious statement about the pretension and superficiality of Victorian upper-class society.

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