Common Grammatical Errors in Academic Writing

Most people don’t enjoy talking about grammar, thinking about grammar, or submitting to the many rules of grammar. Rules of grammar and usage change as a language evolves, and many of the rules that were once important are now of lesser concern, if not obsolete. Likewise, certain blunders that are still technically considered “grammatical errors,” are much less damaging to your writing than others. For example, a split infinitive is not the end of the world. A writer who opts “to further develop the argument” when they should decide “to develop further the argument” so the word “further” does not split the sentences verbs (“to” and “develop”) might not lose any grade points. Similarly, many writers can get away with ending a sentence with a preposition (“Preston was not picky about whom he danced with,” as opposed to the more grammatically correct “Preston was not picky about with whom he danced”). Who/whom is another tricky issue in writing – see the attached “Tricks to Remembering Commonly Confused Words” handout, for a tip.

However, the errors outlined below are more serious, glaring grammatical errors. Notwithstanding the “pickier” rules, correctness actually does affect the readability of your writing. Repeated errors may lead readers to question more than just your grasp of English grammar rules, but the level of thought and care applied to the work as a whole.

Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments look like sentences. They start with a capital, perhaps include some punctuation, and end with the period. However, fragments are missing one or another important component without which they are not a sentence.

**Crash course in sentence structure**

Two types of sentence fragments (and how to fix them):

1. The *Missing Piece*

   - A sentence must have a subject and a verb.
     - **Verb** = the action word in the sentence
     - **Subject** = the word performing the action
   - If either the subject or the verb is missing from the sentence, the sentence is incomplete.

Examples:

- *The discussion about opening procedures.* (no verb here!)
  - *The discussion was about opening procedures.*
  - *The discussion about opening procedures heated up quickly.*
• Found the policies quite stifling. (no subject here! Who, or what, found the policies stifling?)
  ▪ The hotel guests found the policies quite stifling.

2. The Dependent Clause

• A dependent clause can’t stand on its own as a sentence – the dependent clause relies on an independent clause to work as a sentence.
• Dependent clauses contain subordinating conjunctions that make them dependent.
  o Although the film lacked a storyline. (Although is a subordinating clause, making the clause dependent.)
  o To fix problem, either delete the subordinating clause, or add an independent clause to complete the sentence.
    ▪ The film lacked a storyline.
    ▪ Although the film lacked a storyline, the mood and cinematography were outstanding.

Try reading your work aloud: incomplete sentences sound incomplete.

Run-ons

Many people think run-ons are longwinded sentences; in fact, a run-on is a broad term use to describe two similar (and serious!) grammatical errors: the fused sentence and the comma splice.

• Run-ons occur when two independent clauses (ie. phrases that are grammatically complete enough to stand alone as sentences) are linked together incorrectly with inadequate punctuation.
• What counts as “inadequate punctuation” between two independent clauses?
  a) No punctuation at all. This is called a fused sentence.
  b) A comma. This is called a comma splice.

Here is an example using the two independent clauses “I stayed up all night” and “I am exhausted.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fused sentence</th>
<th>I stayed up all night I am exhausted.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comma splice</td>
<td>I stayed up all night, I am exhausted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fused sentences are less common in academic writing, but comma splices run rampant. A comma is not a strong enough punctuation point to connect to independent clauses.
How to fix fused sentences and comma splices

The four remedies for run-ons apply to both fused sentences and comma splices, and are used identically.

1. Use a period instead, and make the clauses into two separate sentences.
   I stayed up all night. I am exhausted.

2. Keep the comma (or insert one if none was there before), and insert whichever coordinating conjunction works in the sentence.
   I stayed up all night, so I am exhausted.

3. Make one of the clauses dependent on the other by adding a subordinating conjunction.
   Since I stayed up all night, I am exhausted.

4. Connect the two clauses with a semicolon, or a semicolon followed by a transition word. Semicolons are strong enough pieces of punctuation to stand between two independent clauses.
   I stayed up all night; I am exhausted.
   I stayed up all night; thus, I am exhausted.

Errors in Subject-verb agreement

Correct subject-verb agreement means that a singular subject takes a singular verb, while a plural subject takes a plural verb.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The horse wins.</td>
<td>The horses win.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Errors in subject-verb agreement usually occur when the writer is not sure what the subject is. Sometimes, other words or phrases occurring between the subject and the verb cause the writer to lose sight of the subject. Here is an extreme example:
A bag full of Macintosh apples, peaches, dates, almonds, clipper ships, tarantulas, Rottweilers, and bowties were discovered in the trunk of his car.

The subject of this sentence is actually the bag, so “were discovered” should read “was discovered.” Cover up all the extra words in this sentence and the subject becomes clear:

A bag full of Macintosh apples, peaches, dates, almonds, clipper ships, tarantulas, Rottweilers, and bowties was discovered in the trunk of his car.

Here’s something to note – the grammar-check didn’t even pick up that mistake.

Two Lesser-Known Rules about Subject-Verb Agreement

1. When compound subjects are joined by or; either… or; neither… nor; or not… but, the verbs should agree with the nearest subject.

Examples:
- Not the dogs but the owner is the real issue in this situation.
  - The child and the parents are both subjects. Since “parents” appears closer to the verb, the verb should agree with the “parents.” Therefore, the verb should be singular.
- Some would say that neither Michael Myers nor other masked horror villains are particularly frightening without their masks.
  - Michael Myers and the other villains are both subjects. Since “other masked horror villains” appears closer to the verb, the verb should agree accordingly. Therefore, the verb should be plural.

2. When used as subjects, the phrases “each (of),” “either (of)” and “neither (of)” are considered singular, and should take singular verbs. This may seem counterintuitive, because “each,” “either” and “neither” imply more than one. But, such are the rules.

Examples:
- Each of the students receives a planner, a pencil, and a nifty eraser.
- Neither of the investigators has a clue.

Misplaced and dangling modifiers

Modifiers are used to explain or add information to another part of the sentence. Misplaced modifiers are incorrectly positioned in a sentence, and appear to modify the wrong thing.

Example:
- Judith found the cat that belonged to her brother named Barnacle.
The modifier “named Barnacle” was supposed to modify the cat. However, its position in the sentence has “named Barnacle” modifying the brother.

The writer thinks the cat’s name is Barnacle; however, this sentence suggests Barnacle is the brother.

Misplaced modifiers usually occur because the modifier appears too far away from the part of the sentence being modified. To fix this problem, reconstruct the sentence so the modifier and modified are closer together. In the above example, the cat needs to be brought closer to its name:

- Judith found her brother’s cat named Barnacle.

Dangling modifiers modify words that didn’t even make it into the sentence. The modifier “dangles” because it applies to nothing grammatically in the sentence. Dangling modifiers can usually, though not always, be caught dangling at the beginning of sentences.

Example:
- Living on campus, coffee is easy to find.
  - “Living on campus” is dangling. This phrase is trying to modify something that isn’t there. Who is living on campus?

Correction: To fix dangling modifiers, add a proper subject to the sentence.

- For students living on campus, coffee is easy to find.
- Living on campus, students can find coffee easily

Errors in word choice

Using the wrong words can impair the meaning of your sentences and invite criticisms from readers. Certain words resemble each other either in sound, spelling, or meaning, but cannot be used interchangeably. The best way to avoid misusing words like these is to memorize the differences between them. See the attached list for tips and tricks for differentiating between commonly confused words.

Works Consulted