

Common Grammar Mistakes

Writers are often faced with challenges concerning grammar. The best way to overcome these is to learn the rules and 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 class to work.

Additional information and examples can be found in *Handbook for Writers* on pages 227-239.

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: (from The New St. Martin's Handbook)

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

Additional information and examples can be found in *Handbook for Writers* on pages 181-208.

Sentence Fragment

A sentence fragment usually lacks a subject, verb, or begins with a subordinating word. Examples are found in The New St. Martin's Handbook.

Lacks a subject

Marie Antoinette spent huge sums of money on herself and her favorites. ^{Her extravagance helped} ~~Helped~~ bring on the French Revolution.

Lacks complete verb

The old aluminum boat ^{was} ~~^~~ sitting on its trailer.

Beginning with subordinating word

We returned to the drugstore. ^{where} ~~Where~~ [^] we waited for the rest of the gang.

Additional information and examples can be found in *Handbook for Writers* on pages 255-266.

- Loud music **affects** people’s hearing for life, so many bands have **effected** changes to lower the volume. Many fans, however, don’t 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?

Additional examples can be found in *Handbook for Writers* on pages 340-358.

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: (from The New St. Martin’s Handbook)

- 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 *Handbook for Writers* on pages 800-804.

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: (from The New St. Martin’s Handbook)

- 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~~ investigate only those leads that seem most promising.

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: (from The New St. Martin’s Handbook)

- 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. Examples are found in The New St. Martin’s Handbook.

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 *Handbook for Writers* on pages 219-226.

Lack of Agreement Between Pronoun and Antecedent

Most pronouns are used to replace another word so that it does 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: (from The New St. Martin's Handbook) ^{its}

- 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 *Handbook for Writers* on pages 240-244.

Missing Comma in a Series

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

Examples: (from The New St. Martin's Handbook)

- 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 *Handbook for Writers* on pages 403-404.

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 *Handbook for Writers* on pages 401-403.

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: (from The New St. Martin's Handbook)

- 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 *Handbook for Writers* on pages 274, 277-278.

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, coordinating conjunction, or period.

Examples: (from The New St. Martin's Handbook)

- 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~~ ^{this} was a family tradition.

Additional information and examples can be found in *Handbook for Writers* on pages 270-278.

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.

Examples: (from The New St. Martin's Handbook)

- 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 *Handbook for Writers* on pages 407-409.

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: (from The New St. Martin's Handbook): *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.