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 on pages 215-24.

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 feline imagery throughout the poem.
- The professor often discusses the meaning of imagery in Shakespeare’s plays.
- Nobody imagined he would actually become president.
- The students asked the college to provide healthier food options in the cafeteria.

Additional information and examples can be found in A Writer’s Reference on pages 224-31.

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 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 pages 259-65.

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 but he could not swim to shore.
- Klee’s paintings seem simple; 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 pages 266-72.

**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 well-being.
- It’s anybody’s guess as to whether we’ll have a pop quiz tomorrow.
- Children’s Halloween costumes can range from adorable to hideous.
- Ron Guidry was once one of the Yankees’ most electrifying pitchers.
- The Stearns’ beautiful home is made from western yellow flagstone.

Additional information and examples can be found in A Writer’s Reference on pages 339-42.

**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 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 A Writer’s Reference on page 341-42.

**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 with a “pitiful, helpless giant.”
- Finally, she refused to comply with army regulations.
- Children show curiosity about how things work at a very young age.

Additional information and examples can be found in A Writer’s Reference on pages 306-10.

**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:

- Lucy was watching the great blue heron take off when she 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 pages 148-49.

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

Additional information and examples can be found in A Writer’s Reference on pages 146-47.

**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, 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 was the cause of the war.

Additional information and examples can be found in A Writer’s Reference on pages 242-44.

**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 their new home.
- Neither Jane nor Susan brought their husband to the party.
- The team’s players frequently changed their positions to get varied experience.
- Every student must provide his own uniform.

Additional information and examples can be found in A Writer’s Reference on pages 238-41.
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 pages 319.

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 *A Writer’s Reference* on pages 318 and 325.

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 *A Writer’s Reference* on pages 317 and 398-99.
**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.**

*Example:* After they finished studying, **Juan and Maria went to the movies.**

- *dependent clause*                                                - *independent clause*
  - **Juan and Maria went to the movies** after they finished studying.  
  - Independent clause                                              - dependent clause – no comma needed

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer’s Reference* on pages 398-99.

**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, a coordinating conjunction, or a period. Examples:

- 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 was a family tradition.

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer’s Reference* on pages 266-72.

**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. Nonessential elements are **not** essential, but punctuation is.

Examples:

- 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 *A Writer’s Reference* on pages 321-25.

**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 (all the commas below should be removed):

- The campers need clothes **that are durable.**
- Scientists **who study the earth’s structure** are called geologists.
- The song “Viva la Vida” **was blasted out of huge amplifiers at the concert.**

Additional information and examples can be found in *A Writer’s Reference* on pages 321-25.
Principal Misuses of Commas

- Don’t use a comma after a subject or a verb:
  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 pages 329-33.