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Top 10 Most Common Grammar Problems

These are the grammar issues that I see most often when working with students in the Writing Center and with students in composition courses. When I discuss nouns that are subjects of sentences, I've highlighted them in blue. Verbs are in green. Direct objects are in orange.

Writers typically make most of these errors because they are in a rush, forget to proofread, or miss them while they are proofreading. Most of the errors are pretty easy to fix, and most writers know how to fix them—those writers just need practice finding, recognizing, and correcting the errors. These explanations may help you figure out how to identify these errors and understand why it's worth revising to correct them.

Subject-Verb Agreement Problems (See *The Everyday Writer, 5th ed.,* pages 295-6, 323-28)

This problem tends to happen when the subject and verb are separated and other nouns of different number appear in between them. In the example, the subject of the sentence is "Meggie and Holly" and the verb is "to help."

Incorrect: **Meggie and Holly**, tutors who work at the Writing Center with Brooke, **helps** students with their writing.

Correct: **Meggie and Holly**, tutors who work at the Writing Center with Brooke, **help** students with their writing.

Inconsistent Verb Tense (8, 311-322)

Be sure to stay in present or past consistently—do not change verb tense in the middle of the explanation or story. Readers are not fans of this confusing mistake.

Incorrect: While tutoring students last Friday, Dr. Beam **realized** that she **leaves** the stove on at home. She **rushed** to her car and **turn** on the engine. When she **reaches** the house, **opens** the door, and **looks** into the kitchen, she **saw** that she **is** wrong. Luckily, the stove **is** not on. The house **is** safe.

Correct: While tutoring students last Friday, Dr. Beam **realized** that she **left** the stove on at home. She **rushed** to her car and **turned** on the engine. When she **reached** the house, **opened** the door, and **looked** into the kitchen, she **saw** that she was wrong. Luckily, the stove **was** not on. The house **was** safe.

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Noun-Pronoun Agreement Problem (10, 329-338)[1]

Like subject-verb agreement problems, noun-pronoun agreement problems happen when the two are separated by text. If the noun that the pronoun refers to is singular, then the pronoun should be singular. If the noun is plural, the pronoun should be plural.

Incorrect: **Sheila** walked to the Centennial Center to meet **their** friend, Jake.

Correct: **Sheila** walked to the Centennial Center to meet **her** friend, Jake.

Another noun-pronoun agreement problem is using incorrect relative pronouns.

Incorrect: **Brandon** is the person **that** won the contest.

Correct: **Brandon** is the person **who** won the contest.

"Who" is used to refer to people; "that" is used to refer to objects. So, we use "who" to refer to the person Brandon, who is the subject in the example sentence above.

Unclear Pronoun Antecedent (6, 329-338)

While we're discussing pronouns, I'll mention one additional problem that may occur: unclear pronoun antecedent. A pronoun refers back to the closest preceding noun, or antecedent. However, sometimes writers forget this and use an unclear pronoun, confusing the reader.

Incorrect/Confusing: My cat, Ray, enjoys tearing up the curtains and is always getting into fights with the neighbor's cat. **He** is such a mess.

Who is a mess, Ray or the neighbor's cat?

Correct/Clearer: My cat, Ray, enjoys tearing up the curtains and is always getting into fights with neighbor's cat. **Ray** is such a mess.

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[1] Special note: as someone studying grammar, you should know that there are gender neutral pronouns in development in the English language. There are linguistic, political, and social reasons for changes in spoken language. Sometimes it is correct to refer to a person you do not know as "they." As always, you word choice will depend on your audience. To read more, see these articles:

Everett, Caleb. "Gender, pronouns and thought: The ligature between epicene pronouns and a more neutral gender perception." *Gender and Language* 5.1 (2011): 133-152.

Langer, S. J. "Gender (Dis) Agreement: A Dialogue on the Clinical Implications of Gendered Language." *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health* 15.3 (2011): 300-307.

Spade, Dean. "Some Very Basic Tips for Making Higher Education More Accessible to Trans Students *and* Rethinking How We Talk about Gendered Bodies." *Radical Teacher* 92.1 (2011): 57-62. *Project MUSE*. Web. 20 Dec. 2012. <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.

Though the second sentence sounds repetitive of the first, it is actually correct because it does not contain an unclear pronoun.

Passive Voice (287)

Identify the subject, the verb, and the direct object and place them in THAT ORDER. If those elements appear in reverse order, then you are writing in the passive voice. Readers prefer active voice because it's less wordy and keeps the focus of the sentence on the person who (or thing that) performed the action.

Passive voice: The **bills were not paid**.

Who did not pay the bills?

Active voice: **I** did **not pay** the **bills**.

I thought so.

Sentence Fragments or Run-on Sentences (9, 12, 347-54)

This is a case of too little or too much. In academic writing, like essay writing or report writing, students should use full sentences that contain both a subject and a verb and express a complete thought. Sentence fragments (incomplete sentences) or Run-on sentences (sentences that contain more than one complete sentence; sometimes called "fused sentences," too) are errors that are fairly easy to fix.

  Sentence fragment: While Dr. Smith is correct in her analysis.

This fragment does not contain a complete thought. It seems like there is something missing after the word "analysis." Notice that if you removed the word "While" from the phrase, it would become a complete sentence.

  Complete sentence: While Dr. Smith is mostly correct in her analysis, she neglects to include an important variable.

  Run-on sentence: While Dr. Smith is mostly correct in her analysis, she neglects to include an important variable that variable is the condition of the lab where she completed the testing.

  Two complete sentences: While Dr. Smith is mostly correct in her analysis, she neglects to include an important variable. That variable is the condition of the lab where she completed the testing.

Two other ways to correct run-on sentences are to add a comma and a coordinating conjunction between the two complete sentences OR to add a semicolon between the two complete sentences.

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Incorrect Conjunctions (300-302)

There are four types of conjunctions (words that help the reader understand the relationship between words): coordinating, correlative, subordinating conjunctions, and conjunctive adverbs. Here are a few common examples of each:

Coordinating:	Correlative:	Subordinating:	Conjunctive Adverbs:
and	both . . . and	after	however
but	either . . . or	if	also
or	neither . . . nor	since	thus
yet	not only . . . but also	though	furthermore

Sometimes students choose a conjunction that is doesn't suit the sentence. A student might write "but" when he meant "and," for example. The correct conjunction will depend on the relationship between the ideas, person, places, events, or items you are discussing.

Incorrect conjunction and conjunctive adverb: Stacy meant to drop off her books at home **and** dropped them off at work **otherwise**.

Better: Stacy meant to drop off her books at home **but** dropped them off at work **instead**.

Misplaced Modifiers (343-346)

These are fairly easy to spot if you read sentences aloud and look for phrasing that makes a sentence sound funny or absurd. The problem is that a modifying or descriptive phrase appears in the wrong place. The easy fix is to move the phrase closer to the noun or verb it modifies.

Incorrect: Kyle decided he would cook dinner for his family **during class**.

Correct: **During class**, Kyle decided he would cook dinner for his family.

Wrong Word or Malapropism (4-5)

This kind of mistake could also make writers' statements sound a bit off. Choosing the ~~rung~~ wrong or inexact word can ~~disjoint~~ distract your readers, and even if they knew what you meant, your argument or description could lose its ~~string~~ strength. Microsoft Word will usually miss these errors, so reading your paper aloud, or having a peer review it for misused words, will be worth it.

Faulty Sentence Structure (8, 276)

Sometimes when writers compose, they may lose their train of thought or switch types of sentences mid-way through statements. Students should review each sentence to make sure that it reads clearly and makes sense. Here are a couple of examples:

Incorrect (switches modes mid-sentence): What if the author had composed the argument a different way, but it is good as-is.

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Better: If the author had composed the argument in a different way the text would be stronger, but as-is, the argument does function.

Incorrect (lack of parallel structure): The recipe needs a touch of cumin, garlic, and should be simmered longer so the beans will cook through and the flavors will marry.

Better: The recipe needs a touch of cumin and garlic, and the simmering time should be increased so the beans will cook through and the flavors will marry.