

Campus Academic Resource Program

Ten Most Common Grammar Errors

This handout will:

- Define the ten most common grammar errors.
- Explain how to best avoid those common grammar errors.
- Give examples of improper and proper grammar use in each situation.
- Provide exercises to practice correcting grammar errors.

I. Subject-Verb Agreement

Each sentence (or independent clause) must contain both a subject and a verb. The subject and the verb must “agree” when it comes to their singularity or plurality. A singular subject must be accompanied by a singular verb. The same rule applies to plural subjects and verbs. To avoid mistakes in subject-verb agreement, make sure that the following rules are being followed:

- Confirm that singular subjects have verbs that end with –s
 - The shower requires a good scrub once a week to prevent mold and mildew.
- Confirm that plural subjects have verbs that do not end with –s
 - Tests create anxiety for most students.
- Confirm that a compound subject (a subject that includes two nouns) containing both singular and plural nouns (“the boy nor the girls”) linked by a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) has a verb that agrees with the noun it is closest to.
 - Neither the boy nor the girls play basketball. (“Girls” is the noun closest to the verb, so we use “play” instead of “plays”)
- Confirm that the verb agrees in plurality with the actual subject (“the group”) and not the subject phrase (“the group of athletes”). “Athletes” is a plural noun, but “the group” is not.
 - The group of athletes faces several tough matches on the road.

II. Verb Tense

Verbs are generally written in either the present or past tenses. Improper grammar can occur in verb use when you incorrectly use the wrong tense.

- Keep your argument and any author or scholar you cite in the present tense.
 - Ex: I believe he has already made his point. (“believe” is present tense)
- Keep historical events in the past tense.
 - Ex: Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* inaugurated a new type of literature in the *Trecento* period.
- Limit use of verb phrases that contain “be”.
 - Ex: It will represent a comeback.
 - Not: It will be representing a comeback.
 - Note: Frequent use of “to be” verbs creates “passive voice” in your writing, which you want to avoid for more academic “active voice”. For more information on this topic see the Active and Passive Voice handout at <http://carp.sfsu.edu/content/helpful-handouts>
- Check sentences for helping (auxiliary) verbs such as.
 - “may, might, can, could, shall, should, will, would, must”
 - Auxiliary or “helping” verbs are words like the ones listed above can accompany other verbs to provide more information like tense.

Campus Academic Resource Program

Ten Most Common Grammar Errors

Verbs should be used to express conditions, doubt, uncertainty, future possibility, or to ask for permission. If they do not, delete them. This is important in eliminating unnecessary verbs (and unnecessary words in general) that make the writing less concise, as well as for avoiding passive voice.

Example:

- **Incorrect**
 - She might have been able to symbolize the queen, however, her role could still be significant in bringing the princesses out of despair.
- **Correct**
 - She might ~~have been able to~~ symbolize the queen, however, her role ~~could~~ still ~~be~~ is significant in bringing the princesses out of despair.
 - Excessive auxiliary verb use or long verbal phrases are unnecessary for most research papers.

III. Dangling Modifiers

Dangling modifiers occur when the noun (or the subject performing the action) does not directly follow the verb phrase. “Modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses that add description. In clear, logical sentences, you will often find modifiers right next to—either in front of or behind—the target words they logically describe” (Simmons).

Example:

- Working all day in the hot sun, her skin felt like it was getting sunburned.
 - The phrase that is underlined is modifying something. Specifically, it is describing a noun. In order to avoid a dangling modifier, the noun this phrase is modifying should directly follow the phrase that is underlined.
 - “her skin” was not working all day in the hot sun, so the sentence becomes unclear.
- **Correct:** Working all day in the hot sun, Julie felt like her skin was getting sunburned.

Additionally, look for verbs with –ed or –ing endings that modify another subject and verb in the same sentence. Ensure that the noun following the phrase is the one that something is being done to.

Example:

- **Incorrect**
 - Wearing a Giants cap, the game was more exciting to Dan.
 - (Was the game wearing the Giants cap?)
- **Correct**
 - Wearing a Giants cap, Dan was more excited about the game.
 - (Dan was wearing the cap so his name needs to be closer to the dependent clause than game.)

Campus Academic Resource Program

Ten Most Common Grammar Errors

IV. Run-On Sentences

Run-on sentences occur when there is more than one independent clause in the sentence and those clauses are not correctly punctuated by a period, comma-conjunction pair, or semicolon.

Example:

- **Incorrect**
 - Body art has become a gender neutral fashion recently, men and women getting tattoos and piercings it is no longer taboo.
 - (Body art has become gender neutral fashion recently), (men and women get tattoos and piercings)(it is no longer taboo) **3 clauses**
- **Correct**
 - Body art has become a gender neutral fashion recently; men and women get tattoos and piercings – it is no longer taboo.

Look for multiple independent clauses. Separate each independent clause by using a period, semicolon, or dash. (For more information on this subject see the Semi-colons, Colons, and Dashes handout at <http://carp.sfsu.edu/content/helpful-handouts>)

3 ways to correct a run-on sentence:

1. You can use a period to separate the two independent clauses.
 - **Ex:** My favorite dinner is pizza. My favorite dessert is rocky road ice cream.
2. You can use a semicolon between two independent clauses (clauses that contain both a subject and a verb) that can exist as their own sentences but whose ideas are connected enough to remain in the same sentence
 - **Ex:** I didn't see the step; I've now got a bandage on my head.
3. You can use coordinating conjunctions such as **FANBOYS** (for, as, nor, but, or, yet, so) before a comma.
 - **Ex:** She owned a car, yet she didn't know how to drive it.

(For more information on this subject see the Run-Ons and Fragments handout at <http://carp.sfsu.edu/content/helpful-handouts>)

V. Fragments

Sentence fragments are clauses which are not independent clauses and do not constitute a complete thought. You can identify fragments by identifying if a sentence has both a subject and a verb.

Check that there is a **subject-verb relationship** to form at least **one independent clause**.

Example:

- **Incorrect**
 - Tumbled across the entire length of the arena.
 - (Who tumbled across the arena? Who is the subject in this sentence? There is no subject-verb pair so this is a fragment.)
- **Correct**
 - The clown tumbled across the entire length of the arena.
 - (By adding “the clown” there is now a subject in this sentence)

Campus Academic Resource Program

Ten Most Common Grammar Errors

Check **sentences that start with prepositions** to make sure the prepositions do not create a fragment.

Example:

- **Incorrect**
 - By developing smart study habits can prepare a college student to succeed.
 - (This sentence is a fragment, because there is no subject to go with “can prepare.”)

- **Correct**
 - Developing smart study habits can prepare a college student to succeed.
 - (Removing the preposition “by” allows “developing smart study habits” to function as the subject.)

Exercise #1

Instructions: The questions below each contain one grammar error that has been previously described (Subject-Verb Agreement, Verb Tense, Dangling Modifiers, Run-On Sentences, and Fragments). Identify the grammar error and correct the error by writing out a new sentence.

1) Even though he was the best pitcher on the team, and the team captain. John played a bad game.

Type of Error: _____

New Sentence: _____

2) Having finished her homework assignment, the TV was turned on by Jill.

Type of Error: _____

New Sentence: _____

3) The squirrels runs away when I chase them.

Type of Error: _____

New Sentence: _____

4) I love to eat Flaming Hot-Cheetos I would eat them every day if I had the chance.

Type of Error: _____

New Sentence: _____

5) Yesterday I go to the mall with my friends.

Type of Error: _____

New Sentence: _____

6) I told my mom that I like reading mystery novels and that I like playing baseball too and that I want her to sign me up for baseball.

Type of Error: _____

New Sentence: _____

7) I need to find a new roommate. Because the one I have now isn't working out.

Campus Academic Resource Program

Ten Most Common Grammar Errors

Type of Error: _____

New Sentence: _____

8) My friends, John and Alex, likes going hiking.

Type of Error: _____

New Sentence: _____

VI. Passive Voice

Passive voice occurs when the object of the sentence is put into subject position. The subject is now **having something done to it** instead of **doing something**. This is confusing because it becomes unclear of who the sentence's subject is.

Example:

- **Active**
 - The professor posted the grades online.
- **Passive**
 - The grades were posted online by the professor.
 - In the second sentence, “the grades” is the subject, but instead of performing an action, they are “being posted”, something is happening to them.
- **Active**
 - City planners are promoting more green space by 2015.
- **Passive**
 - More green space is being promoted by city planners by 2015.
 - The green space is being acted on by city planners so it is passive

Tip: Passive voice is acceptable for scientific writing, but active voice is used for all other academic writing. The reason we use passive voice in certain types of academic writing is to remove subjectivity of the writer, by making the subject passive.

(For more information on this subject see the Active & Passive Voice handout at <http://carp.sfsu.edu/content/helpful-handouts>)

VII. Articles

Articles provide a reference as to *which* noun you are addressing. *The* is used for specific nouns, while *a* is used for non-specific nouns.

- Check that “the” is used when the reader knows which noun you are referring to and that “a” is used to refer to a noun unknown to the reader.
 - **Ex:** We are going to the ballpark.
 - (It is a specific ballpark that readers would be familiar with.)
 - **Ex:** We are going to a ballpark.
 - (It is one of several parks and we do not know which one.)
- When you use the article “a,” ensure that you change it to “an” if the noun begins with a vowel (a, e, i, o, u) or a vowel sound (when it sounds like the word begins with a vowel).
 - **Ex:** Please pass me an apple.
 - **Ex:** Let’s leave in an hour. (Although hour begins with ‘h’, it has a vowel sound.)

Campus Academic Resource Program

Ten Most Common Grammar Errors

- Check that you dropped the article if the noun is abstract or is being discussed collectively or in general.
 - **Ex:** Kindness is contagious. (The article is dropped because ‘kindness’ is intangible)
 - **Ex:** Electronics are pricey. (The article is dropped because ‘electronics’ are being discussed in general.)

(For more information on this subject see the Articles handout at <http://carp.sfsu.edu/content/helpful-handouts>)

VIII. Pronoun Usage

A pronoun is a shorthand way of referring to an earlier noun. When using pronouns, you need to make sure that pronouns agree with the singularity or plurality of the noun they refer to, and that they are used in the right place in the sentence (as the subject or as the object).

- Check that pronouns agree – singular/plural – to the nouns they refer to.
 - **Incorrect**
 - Study abroad programs became more popular after 9/11. It appealed to students’ curiosity about the world.
 - **Correct**
 - Study abroad programs became more popular after 9/11. They appealed to students’ curiosity about the world.
 - (Study abroad programs (plural) appealed to their curiosity so “they” is the correct pronoun because it is also plural.)
- Check whether you use “I/me, he/him, she/her” in the right places. If you have two pronouns or a pronoun and a noun, try dropping one to see if it is still grammatical. The pronouns “me,” “him,” “her,” and “them” cannot be used as the sentence’s subject.
 - **Incorrect**
 - My friend and me booked a flight.
 - (Remove “my friend” (the subject) and “me booked a flight” is incorrect. “Me” cannot be used as the subject.)
 - **Correct**
 - My friend and I booked a flight.
 - (Remove “my friend” and “I booked a flight” is correct. “I” can be used as the subject of the sentence.)
 - **Incorrect**
 - Him ran across the baseball field.
 - **Correct**
 - Ex: He ran across the baseball field.
 - (“He” can be used as the subject of a sentence. “Him” cannot.)

Campus Academic Resource Program

Ten Most Common Grammar Errors

IX. Homophones

Homophones are words that sound the same, but are spelled differently and have different meanings. These words can often be confused with each other, and therefore be misused in writing.

| | |
|---|--|
| who's = contraction for 'who is' | whose = belonging to who |
| its = belonging to it | it's = contraction for 'it is' |
| to = preposition indicating spatial relationship or an infinitive verb like 'to run' | too = excessively or also |
| would have = something that is believed to have happened in the past | would of = a misspelling of 'would have' and spellcheck will not catch this |
| then = related to time or when things occur | than = used for comparison |
| affect = (as a verb) to influence someone or something, (as a noun) relates to emotion | effect = (as a verb) to bring about, (as a noun) a result or outcome of a cause |
| ensure = to make certain or to guarantee | insure = to provide or obtain insurance |
| complement = something that completes or makes something whole | compliment = praise or admiration |
| advice = opinion offered as guidance | advise = the act of giving advice |
| loose = (as an adj.) not tight, (as a verb) to free | lose = to not win or to misplace |

| | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| there = refers to a place | their = belonging to them | they're = contraction for 'they are' |
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|---|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| through = preposition indicating in one side and out the other, or among, or between | thru = unaccepted spelling for 'through' | threw = past tense of 'throw' | thorough = careful, accurate, exhaustively complete |
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(For more information on this subject see the Commonly Misused Words and Phrases handout at <http://carp.sfsu.edu/content/helpful-handouts>)

Campus Academic Resource Program

Ten Most Common Grammar Errors

X. Apostrophes

Apostrophes are used for possessives and contractions. Most struggles with apostrophes occur with proper nouns such as people's names and with singular words that end in -s.

- Check that singular possessions are given an apostrophe or an (’s). Although names that end in -s or -z are not required to have a second (s) for possessive, it is preferred.
 - Both are correct
 - Mrs. Hastings’ cupcakes
 - Mrs. Hastings’s cupcakes.
- Check that plural nouns and plural possessions are given an (s’) or (es’). To make a word that ends in -s or -z plural, use (es), for all other letters just add (s).
 - Incorrect
 - The Jones’s parties are always the best.
 - The apostrophe (’s) is added to singular nouns, but all the family members require that the noun be made plural (es) and then the apostrophe be added.
 - Correct
 - The Joneses’ parties are always the best.
- Check that plural names with no possessions do not use an apostrophe
 - Incorrect
 - The Changs’ own three cars.
 - Correct
 - The Changs own three cars.

Exercise #2

Instructions: The questions below each contain one grammar from the last five ones described (Passive Voice, Articles, Pronoun Agreement, Homophones, and Apostrophes). Identify the grammar error and correct the error by writing out a new sentence.

1) After school, I'm always craving an big piece of pizza.

Type of Error: _____

New Sentence: _____

2) The death of his dog effected Trevor more than he expected.

Type of Error: _____

New Sentence: _____

3) The Wilson’s like to take trips to Yosemite

Type of Error: _____

New Sentence: _____

4) I like to play the dodgeball

Type of Error: _____

New Sentence: _____

Campus Academic Resource Program

Ten Most Common Grammar Errors

5) My best friend and me are not getting along right now

Type of Error: _____

New Sentence: _____

6) The dog was walked by me.

Type of Error: _____

New Sentence: _____

7) I like to play softball with Rocio and Karlee because their very friendly.

Type of Error: _____

New Sentence: _____

8) After each semester, each student must meet with their adviser.

Type of Error: _____

New Sentence: _____

Campus Academic Resource Program

Ten Most Common Grammar Errors

Answer Key

Exercise #1

- 1) Fragment
Even though he was the best pitcher on the team, and the team **captain, John** played a bad game.
- 2) Dangling Modifier
Having finished her homework assignment, **Jill turned on the TV**
- 3) Subject - Verb Agreement
The squirrels **run** away when I chase them
- 4) Run-On Sentence
I love eating Flaming Hot-Cheetos. **I** would eat them everyday if I had the chance.
- 5) Verb Tense
Yesterday **I went** to the mall with my friends.
- 6) Run-On Sentence
I told my mom that I like reading mystery novels. **I told her I like playing** baseball too, and that I want her to sign me up for the team.
- 7) Fragment
I need to find a new **roommate, because** the one I have now isn't working out.
- 8) Subject - Verb Agreement
My friends, John and Alex, **like** going hiking.

Exercise #2:

- 1) Articles
After school, I'm always craving **a** big piece of pizza.
- 2) Homophones
The death of his dog **affected** Trevor more than he expected.
- 3) Apostrophes
The **Wilson's'** favorite place to camp is Yosemite, CA.
- 4) Articles
I like to **play dodgeball**
- 5) Pronoun Agreement
My best friend **and I** are not getting along right now
- 6) Passive Voice
I walked the dog
- 7) Homophones
I like to play softball with Rocio and Karlee because **they're** very friendly
- 8) Pronoun Agreement
After each semester, each student must meet with **his or her** adviser.

Campus Academic Resource Program

Ten Most Common Grammar Errors

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