

# Attending to Grammar

## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Grammar is more than just a set of rules. It is the ever-evolving structure of our language, a field which merits study, invites analysis, and promises fascination.

Don't believe us? Didn't think you would.

The fact is that grammar can be pretty dull: no one likes rules, and memorizing rules is far worse than applying them. (Remember studying for your driver's test?) However, as I've said, grammar is more than this: it is an understanding of how language works, of how meaning is made, and of how it is broken.

You understand more about grammar than you think you do. If you were brought up as an English speaker, you probably know when to use articles, for example, or how to construct different tenses, probably without even thinking about it. (Non-native speakers of English may struggle with these matters for years.)

However, when you write, even as a native speaker of English, you will encounter problems and questions that you may not know how to answer. "Who" or "whom?" Comma or no comma? Passive, or active?

To answer these questions, you will want to have a handbook on hand. Handbooks are available at the OWRC; tutors are also available to help you find what you need.

## MOST COMMONLY OCCURRING ERRORS

Would grammar seem more manageable to you if we told you that writers tend to make the same twenty mistakes over and over again? In fact, a study of error by Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors shows that **twenty different mistakes comprise 91.5 percent of all errors in student texts**. If you can control these twenty errors, you will go a long way in creating prose that is correct and clear.

Below is an overview of these errors, listed according to the frequency with which they occur. Look for them in your own prose.

1. **Missing comma after introductory phrases.** For example: After the devastation of the siege of Leningrad the Soviets were left with the task of rebuilding their population as well as their city. (A comma should be placed after "Leningrad.")
2. **Vague pronoun reference.** For example: The boy and his father knew that he was in trouble. (Who is in trouble? The boy? His Father? Some other person?)
3. **Missing comma in compound sentence.** For example: Wordsworth spent a good deal of time in the Lake District with his sister Dorothy and the two of them were rarely apart. (Comma should be placed before the "and.")
4. **Wrong word.** This speaks for itself.
5. **No comma in nonrestrictive relative clauses.** Here you need to distinguish between a restrictive relative clause and a nonrestrictive relative clause. Consider

the sentence, "My brother in the red shirt likes ice cream." If you have TWO brothers, then the information about the shirt is restrictive, in that it is necessary to defining WHICH brother likes ice cream. Restrictive clauses, because they are essential to identifying the noun, use no commas. However, if you have ONE brother, then the information about the shirt is not necessary to identifying your brother. It is NON-RESTRICTIVE and, therefore, requires commas: "My brother, in the red shirt, likes ice cream."

6. **Wrong/missing inflected ends.** "Inflected ends" refers to a category of grammatical errors that you might know individually by other names - subject-verb agreement, who/whom confusion, and so on. The term "inflected endings" refers to something you already understand: adding a letter or syllable to the end of a word changes its grammatical function in the sentence. For example, adding "ed" to a verb shifts that verb from present to past tense. Adding an "s" to a noun makes that noun plural. A common mistake involving wrong or missing inflected ends is in the usage of **who/whom**. "Who" is a pronoun with a subjective case; "whom" is a pronoun with an objective case. We say "Who is the speaker of the day?" because "who" in this case refers to the **subject** of the sentence. But we say, "To whom am I speaking?" because, here, the pronoun is an **object** of the preposition "to."
7. **Wrong/missing preposition.** Occasionally prepositions will throw you. Consider, for example which is better: "different from," or "different than?" Though both are used widely, "different from" is considered grammatically correct. The same debate surrounds the words "toward" and "towards." Though both are used, "toward" is preferred in writing. When in doubt, check a handbook.
8. **Comma splice.** A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses are joined only with a comma. For example: "Picasso was profoundly affected by the war in Spain, it led to the painting of great masterpieces like Guernica." A comma splice also occurs when a comma is used to divide a subject from its verb. For example: "The young Picasso felt stifled in art school in Spain, and wanted to leave." (The subject "Picasso" is separated from one of its verbs "wanted." There should be no comma in this sentence, unless you are playing with grammatical correctness for the sake of emphasis - a dangerous sport for unconfident or inexperienced writers.)
9. **Possessive apostrophe error.** Sometimes apostrophes are incorrectly left out; other times, they are incorrectly put in (her's, their's, etc.)
10. **Tense shift.** Be careful to stay in a consistent tense. Too often students move from past to present tense without good reason. The reader will find this annoying.
11. **Unnecessary shift in person.** Don't shift from "I" to "we" or from "one" to "you" unless you have a rationale for doing so.
12. **Sentence fragment.** Silly things, to be avoided. Unless, like here, you are using them to achieve a certain effect. Remember: sentences traditionally have both subjects and verbs. Don't violate this convention carelessly.
13. **Wrong tense or verb form.** Though students generally understand how to build tenses, sometimes they use the wrong tense, saying, for example, "In the evenings, I like to lay on the couch and watch TV" "Lay" in this instance is the past tense of the verb, "to lie." The sentence should read: "In the evenings, I like to lie on the couch and watch TV." (Please note that "to lay" is a separate verb meaning "to place in a certain position.")

14. **Subject-verb agreement.** This gets tricky when you are using collective nouns or pronouns and you think of them as plural nouns: "The committee wants [not want] a resolution to the problem." Mistakes like this also occur when your verb is far from your subject. For example, "The media, who has all the power in this nation and abuses it consistently, uses its influence for ill more often than good." (Note that media is an "it," not a "they." The verbs are chosen accordingly.)
15. **Missing comma in a series.** Whenever you list things, use a comma. You'll find a difference of opinion as to whether the next-to-last noun (the noun before the "and") requires a comma. ("Apples, oranges, pears, and bananas...") Our advice is to use the comma because sometimes your list will include pairs of things: "For Christmas she wanted books and tapes, peace and love, and for all the world to be happy." If you are in the habit of using a comma before the "and," you'll avoid confusion in sentences like this one.
16. **Pronoun agreement error.** Many students have a problem with pronoun agreement. They will write a sentence like "Everyone is entitled to their opinion." The problem is, "everyone" is a singular pronoun. You will have to use "his" or "her."
17. **Unnecessary commas with restrictive clauses.** See the explanation for number five, above.
18. **Run-on, fused sentence.** *Run-on* sentences are sentences that run on forever, they are sentences that ought to have been two or even three sentences but the writer didn't stop to sort them out, leaving the reader feeling exhausted by the sentence's end which is too long in coming. (Get the picture?) *Fused sentences* occur when two independent clauses are put together without a comma, semi-colon, or conjunction. For example: "Researchers investigated several possible vaccines for the virus then they settled on one"
19. **Dangling, misplaced modifier.** Modifiers are any adjectives, adverbs, phrases, or clauses that a writer uses to elaborate on something. Modifiers, when used wisely, enhance your writing. But if they are not well-considered - or if they are put in the wrong places in your sentences - the results can be less than eloquent. Consider, for example, this sentence: "The professor wrote a paper on sexual harassment in his office." Is the sexual harassment going on in the professor's office? Or is his office the place where the professor is writing? One hopes that the latter is true. If it is, then the original sentence contains a **misplaced modifier** and should be re-written accordingly: "In his office, the professor wrote a paper on sexual harassment." Always put your modifiers next to the nouns they modify.

**Dangling modifiers** are a different kind of problem. They intend to modify something that isn't in the sentence. Consider this: "As a young girl, my father baked bread and gardened." The writer means to say, "When I was a young girl, my father baked bread and gardened." The modifying phrase "as a young girl" refers to some noun not in the sentence. It is, therefore, a dangling modifier. Other dangling modifiers are more difficult to spot, however. Consider this sentence: "Walking through the woods, my heart ached." Is it your heart that is walking through the woods? It is more accurate (and more grammatical) to say, "Walking through the woods, I felt an ache in my heart." Here you avoid the dangling modifier.

20. **Its/it's error.** "Its" is a possessive pronoun. "It's" is a contraction for "it is."

## **BECOMING YOUR OWN GRAMMAR TUTOR**

Many of these errors you will find easy to spot and to correct. Perhaps you learned in high school to look for subject-verb agreement. Perhaps you consistently catch any confusion between "it's" and "its." Still, some of these errors will be harder to catch. How can you learn to handle these errors and to become your own grammar tutor?

**The first thing that you might do is to make a trip to the OWRC.** We have tutors here that might help you with grammar questions. They might help you to see patterns of error in your work, and they can give you advice as to how to eliminate these errors. They can also help you to get used to using a handbook. Every student writer should have a handbook on his desk as he writes. Even the experienced writer comes across grammar questions that she needs answered. In creating this Web page, for example, I consulted my handbook three times.

When reading your papers for grammar errors, you'll want to make note of a few things.

- **First, determine whether the error is a matter of carelessness, or a pattern of error.** If you find a single run-on in your paper, there's probably not much to worry about. Fix it, and be on your way. But if you notice that you tend to run on again and again, it's time to think about the run-on. Do you understand the boundaries of the sentence? Do you understand the grammatical principles at work in determining these boundaries? If you think that you don't, consult a tutor and/or a handbook. Come up with strategies for addressing the problem so that it doesn't occur in future drafts.
- **Second, prioritize among your errors.** If you find that your grammar problems are serious ones, determine which of the problems are most serious and address them first. Problems that interfere with a reader's understanding of your paper - misplaced modifiers, for example, or mistakes in punctuation - ought to be addressed first. If you have trouble determining which mistakes are most serious, visit RWIT. Our tutors can help you to map a course of study in matters of grammar.
- **Third, practice writing sentences.** The only way to learn to write grammatically is to practice, practice, practice. If your writing is very weak, you might benefit from doing sentence exercises in handbooks to strengthen your understanding of grammatical principles. You will also want to use our Grammar Drills. If your writing is fair to middling, you can play with your own sentences, writing and rewriting them to see how using commas, for example, might change the effect or even the meaning of a sentence.
- **And finally, understand that grammar COUNTS.** Your professors expect writing that is correct. They are irritated when you give them papers plagued by error. Your professors may or may not mark the errors on your papers. Don't expect that if you have no red ink on your paper that it is error free. Some professors feel that you should have mastered grammar before college and that it is not their responsibility to point out your mistakes to you. Others will be more helpful and will let you know when your grammar has gone astray. Still, it is your responsibility to master the rules of the language that you speak and write. Learn them well.

## **USEFUL LINKS**

See the OWRC website for additional grammar resources: [www.depts.washington.edu/owrc](http://www.depts.washington.edu/owrc)