



Avoiding Common Errors in Grammar & Punctuation

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Definitions

- Antecedent: The noun to which a pronoun refers or for which a pronoun substitutes
- Phrase: Lacks a subject or a predicate
 - Fearing an accident
 - At the lake's edge
- Clause: Contains a subject and a predicate
 - When the ice cracked
 - Restrictive: Clause is essential, limiting; use no commas
 - Nonrestrictive: Clause is not essential; use commas, dashes, or parentheses to enclose
- Subject: What the writer is talking about
- Predicate: Describes the subject in some way

Sentence Fragments

- Complete sentences have a subject and predicate.

The ambassador attended the conference.

- Sentence fragments are a punctuated group of words lacking either a subject or a predicate

Hoping this meets with your approval.

(No subject or predicate)

Received your letter this morning.

(No subject)

Note: Place a subject & predicate in every sentence.

Person

- First Person: The subject is speaking
I will discuss types of ballistic missiles in my paper.
- Second Person: The subject is spoken to
You will discuss types of ballistic missiles in your paper.
- Third Person: The subject is [person(s) or thing(s)]
spoken about
This paper discusses the types of ballistic missiles.

Note: Use third person to write about your subject.

Gender

- Feminine--she, her, girl, woman, etc.
My friend and adviser offered her help.
- Masculine--he, his, boy, man, etc.
If a person works hard, he can accomplish a lot.
- Common--adult, people, cousin, neighbor, etc.
If people work hard, they can accomplish a lot.
- Neuter--it, typewriter, book, wagon, radio, etc.

Note: Neuter gender nouns take the pronoun *it*.

If anybody wants an *education*, he can get *it*.

How to Avoid Errors & Sexism in Gender

- Use a plural antecedent and a plural pronoun.
 - Many brought their lunches with them.
 - Athletes deserve their privacy.
- Use masculine gender, avoid any use, or make gender agree with fact:
 - One likes to do what he can do well.
 - Anyone wanting a pen can get it here.
 - None of the students had the needed credits.
 - Everyone attending the FEW meeting presented her membership card.

Voice

- Active--subject is the **doer** of the action

Each ambassador signed the truce.

- Passive--subject is the **receiver** of the action

The truce was signed by each ambassador.

Note: Use active voice. Let your subject perform the action.

Why to Avoid Passive Voice

- Obscures the subject
- Increases the length of a sentence
- Shifts the emphasis from your subject

Note: Avoid using passive voice unless you are deliberately emphasizing the predicate or obscuring the subject.

Number

Applies to nouns, verbs, and pronouns

- Singular-- refers to **one** person or thing
- Plural--refers to **more than one** person or thing

Singular

Plural

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------|
| • Boy | Boys |
| • Mother-in-law | Mothers-in-law |
| • Shelf | Shelves |
| • Man | Men |
| • Makes | Make |
| • Is | Are |
| • I | We |
| • Him/Her--He/She | Them/They |

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

Pronouns must agree in gender, person, & number.

- If **one** is nervous, **she/he** should try to relax.
- When **Father** called the officer, **he** was very angry.
- **Every worker** must furnish **his** own equipment.
- Has **anyone** forgotten **her** FWP membership card?
- Has **everyone** handed in **his** paper?
- The teacher expects **every girl** to make **her** own dresses.
- **That sort** of gossip should be ignored.
- I prefer **these kinds** of writing paper.

Tenses

- Present: **walk**
- Past: **walked**
- Future: **will walk**
- Present Perfect /Progressive: **Have walked/has been walking**
- Past Perfect/Progressive **Had walked/had been walking**
- Future Perfect/ Progressive **Will have walked/will have been...**

Progressive: I **am** walking, **was** walking, **will be** walking

Myself, Yourself, Himself, etc.

- Never used as the subject of a sentence.
My wife and myself (I) appreciate your help.
- Never used as a substitute for a personal pronoun.
He sent the book to John and myself (me).
- Always refers back to the subject.
I made the dress myself.
- Sometimes used to add emphasis to a noun or pronoun.
John himself built the canoe.

Note: *Myself* and *yourself* are often used in conversation in place of personal pronouns--avoid such use in formal speech and writing.

Who, Which, That

- Use *who* when the antecedent is a person.
This is the girl *who* won the award.
- Use *that* to refer to either persons or things.
This is the dog *that* (or *which*) was lost. (restrictive)
- Use *which* to refer to anything except persons.
The leftover lettuce, *which* is in the refrigerator, would make a good salad. (nonrestrictive)

Note: Restrictive & nonrestrictive clauses may use *which*.

Only restrictive clauses begin with *that*.

Some writers reserve *which* only for nonrestrictive clauses.

Misplaced Modifiers

- Readers link a modifier to the word closest to it.
- Writers carefully place modifiers to avoid confusion.

Confusing: He served steak to the men on paper plates.

Revised: He served the men steak on paper plates.

Confusing: He came to enjoy flying over time.

Revised: Over time he came to enjoy flying.

Confusing: Snipers who fire on soldiers often escape capture.

Revised: Snipers who fire on soldiers escape capture often.

Revised: Snipers who often fire on soldiers escape capture.

Problem Punctuation Marks

- **Commas**
- **Quotation Marks**
- **Ellipsis Points**
- **Apostrophes**

Commas

- Use to separate elements of a sentence or items in a series; use before *and*, *but*, or other conjunction.
 - The building is finished, but it has no tenants.
 - Unfortunately, the only tenant pulled out.
 - The empty building symbolizes a weak local economy, which affects everyone.
 - The primary cause, the decline of local industry, is not news.
 - The city needs healthier businesses, new schools, and improved housing.
 - A tall, sleek, skyscraper is not needed.

Quotation Marks

- Use to enclose direct quotations, titles of magazine articles, songs, poems, chapters of books and to set off words within a sentence.
 - “Fortunately,” she said, “I can bake more toast.”
 - Elton John wrote “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.”
 - *Cosmopolitan* magazine ran an article titled “Sunday Morning Brunch Ideas.”
 - In Chapter 8, titled “How to Be Interesting,” the author explains the art of conversation.
 - With all the “compassion” it could muster, the agency turned away two-thirds of those seeking help.

--Joan Simonson

- Place commas and periods inside quotation marks.

Sample Block Quotation Format

(Block quotes require no quotation marks.)

In his study of the lives of unemployed black men, Elliot Liebow observes that “unskilled” construction work requires more experience and skill than is generally assumed.

A healthy, sturdy, active man of good intelligence requires from two to four weeks to break in on a construction job. . . It frequently happens that his foreman or the craftsman he services is not willing to wait that long for him to get into condition or to learn at a glance the difference in size between a rough 2X8 and a finished 2X10. (62)

Ellipsis Dots

- Three spaced periods used to indicate omissions within quotations--at middle, end, or beginning of a sentence; or parts of two sentences; or one or more sentences after a full sentence.

ORIGINAL QUOTATION

- “It was the Cuba of the future. It was going the way of Iran. It was another Nicaragua, another Cambodia, another Vietnam. But all these places, awesome in their histories, are so different from each other that one couldn’t help thinking: this kind of talk was a shorthand for a confusion. All that was being said was that something was happening in the Philippines. Or more plausibly, a lot of different things were happening in the Philippines. And a lot of people were feeling obliged to speak out about it.”

OMISSIONS FROM FENTON QUOTATION

- “But all of these places. . .are so different from each other that one couldn’t help thinking : this kind of talk was a shorthand for a confusion.”
- “It was another Nicaragua. . . .”
- “. . .[O]ne couldn’t help thinking: this kind of talk was a shorthand for a confusion.”
- “All that was being said was that. . .a lot of different things were happening in the Philippines.”
- It was the Cuba of the future. It was going the way of Iran. It was another Nicaragua, another Cambodia, another Vietnam. . . .All that was being said was that something was happening in the Philippines.

Apostrophe

- Use to form contractions (it's, doesn't); to form possessive case; optional use to form plurals of abbreviations, dates, letters, numbers, and words (CD-ROMs); to show omission of a word, letter, or number.
 - Don't, hadn't, wouldn't, let's, it's
 - Boy's, boss' or boss's, children's, boys'
 - Smith's, Smiths'
 - Williams' or Williams's, James' or James's
 - The day's task, five cents' worth, three weeks' vacation
 - Alice and Jack's apartment, Alice's & Jack's apts
 - Everyone's duty, one's coat, someone's hat
 - 'Tis, o'clock, the year '01

Recommended References

- *Tongue and Quill*
- *Air University Style Guide*

Recommended Handbooks

- *The Little, Brown Handbook*, Fowler & Aaron
- *Instant English Handbook*, Semmelmeier & Bolander

Final Thoughts

“Remember, always, that learning a rule is not important in itself. The really important thing is the ability to use what you have learned to express yourself effectively without being especially conscious of any rules at all.”

--Practical English: A Complete Self-Correcting
Guide

QUESTIONS?