

# THE 5 MOST COMMON GRAMMAR MISTAKES

*and how to correct them*

## 1. COMMA ERRORS

- Commas help prevent misreadings: “Rachel loves cooking family and friends” is very different than “Rachel loves cooking, family, and friends.”
- When you’re using a conjunction (like *and* or *but*) to connect two sentences that could both stand on their own, use a comma. Example: “Everyone else hated reading the novel, **but** I enjoyed it.”
- Do not use a comma if one or both of the clauses couldn’t stand alone: “A successful writer creates multiple drafts **and** proofreads carefully.”
- Use a comma after an introductory clause or phrase, as in, “**Here in the Writing Center**, we help students with all types of communication.” A comma also belongs after transitions, like *however*.
- When a list contains three or more items, the items should be separated with commas.
- Non-restrictive elements (clauses, phrases, or appositives that could be removed without significantly changing the meaning of the sentence) should be set off with commas. Example: “The Writing Center, **which is located in Lamar Hall**, offers online appointments.”

## SUBJECT/VERB DISAGREEMENT

## 2.

- Singular nouns should have singular verbs; plural nouns should have plural verbs. Compare: “Sachiko writes” (singular) and “Students write” (plural).
- Make the verb match its subject, even if there are words in between. For example: “Higher **levels** of literacy **benefit** the community.”
- Most compound subjects connected by *and* are plural, as in, “Jordan’s strong writing **skills and** impressive **résumé make** him a natural choice for the position.”
- When compound subjects are connected by *or* or *nor*, make the verb agree with the subject nearest the verb: “Either one final **paper or** two observation **sessions are** required.”
- Treat most indefinite pronouns and collective nouns as singular: “The **audience loves** the movie.” “**Everyone loves** the movie.”
- *Who*, *which*, and *that* need verbs that agree with their antecedents: “Find a teacher who knows you.”

# 3.

## MIXED SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION

- A mixed sentence construction occurs when the different parts of a sentence don't fit together. The problem can be related to grammar or logic.
- In many cases, a mixed sentence construction is the result of a writer starting out to write a sentence one way and then changing his or her mind in the middle.
- Example: "Although I generally enjoy writing papers, but this semester has been rough." The writer began with one sentence strategy in mind, then switched to a different one halfway through. The sentence is better as "Although I generally enjoy writing papers, this semester has been rough," or "I generally enjoy writing papers, but this semester has been rough."
- Make sure that the subject and predicate make sense together.
- In formal English, remove *is when*, *is where*, and *reason . . . is because*. Stick with clear, simple phrasing. Example: "~~The reason~~ I liked the book ~~is because~~ it was exciting."

## PRONOUN PROBLEMS

# 4.

- Pronouns are short, simple words that take the place of nouns.
- When using pronouns, pair plural nouns (like *students*) with plural pronouns (like *they* or *their*). Singular nouns (like *Deshaun* or *report*) should be paired with singular pronouns (like *he* or *it*).
- Keep the point of view consistent throughout a passage. For example, if you've been writing in the first person (with pronouns like *I* and *me*), don't switch to second person (*you*) in the middle.
- Make sure your reader knows which noun a pronoun refers to. If you were to write, "Mary told Jaclyn that it was time for **her** Writing Center appointment," it would be unclear which of the women had the appointment.
- In long passages, mention the original noun again from time to time to keep your reader from becoming confused.

# 5.

## MISPLACED/DANGLING MODIFIERS

- Modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses that modify, or change, other words.
- The reader should be able to tell at a glance what's being modified. Try to keep related words together, and put limiting modifiers like *only* in front of the actual words they modify. Be especially careful with the limiting modifier *not*, which many people misplace.
- Example: "All books are **not** good." This sentence states that good books simply don't exist. When the modifier is placed correctly, the sentence's meaning becomes clear: "**Not** all books are good."
- Resist the urge to place a long modifier between the subject and verb of a sentence. Sentences flow best when the subject moves smoothly into the verb. Example: "The aspiring writer, after completing his novel, began querying literary agents." The sentence is easier to understand as, "After completing his novel, the aspiring writer began querying literary agents."