

Common Grammar Mistakes –Essay/Report Writing

The Most Damaging Common Mistakes

Fragments

Identify and avoid these common errors.

Fragments

Fragments are incomplete sentences. They are missing a verb, or a subject, or both.

- First, the lack of exercise.
- Furthermore, the huge development of the country, easy life and transportation.
- Although the number falling.
- Also the different kinds of entertainment such as videos and television.
- For example, fast food, sweet things and oily food.

How can you fix fragments?

Add a subject, or a verb, or both. Try adding a phrase...

- First, the lack of exercise has led to a big increase in the number of overweight people.
- Furthermore, the huge development of the country, an easier life and luxury cars have meant that many people do not have to work hard.
- Although the number is falling, many students still do not finish high school.
- Different kinds media such as video and television can provide good family entertainment.
- For example, fast food, sweet things and oily food can all lead to obesity.

Comma Splices and Run-On sentences

Comma splices are sentences that should be separate, but are joined with a comma. Run-Ons are sentences that should be separate, but are joined anyway.

Sentence Examples of Comma Splice Mistakes (No proper comma placement)

- In the past people did not have cars they used to walk. (Run-On)
- Heart disease is a big problem it kills thousands of people (Run-On)
- Our modern life is very easy, jobs are easier than they were 50 years ago. (Comma Splice)
- The streets are full of fast food restaurants, people eat there very often. (Comma Splice)

How can you fix comma splices and run-ons?

- Make them into two sentences.
- Keep your sentences short.
- Watch out if you find yourself using commas. Ask “Would a full stop be better?”

Correct Sentences Examples with Proper Comma Placement:

- In the past, people did not have cars. They used to walk.
- In the past, people did not have cars; they used to walk.
- Heart disease is a big problem. It kills thousands of people.
- Heart disease is a big problem because it kills thousands of people.
- Our modern life is very easy. Jobs are easier than they were 50 years ago.
- Our modern life is very easy since jobs are easier than they were 50 years ago
- The streets are full of fast food restaurants. People eat there very often.

(This last sentence might better be rewritten as “The streets are lined with crowded restaurants” or “People enjoy eating in the busy restaurants”)

More Common Mistakes by Essay Writers

Main Component’s Missing

Complete sentences consist of two main components: a subject and a predicate. A sentence's subject almost always consists of a noun that identifies either the agent or the recipient of an action. Meanwhile, the sentence's predicate is the remainder of the sentence. The predicate always consists of a verb, which identifies either what action the subject does or what action happens to the subject. In the sentence, "Naturalists believe that every aspect of the human experience can be explained in terms of scientific processes," "Naturalists" is the subject, while the remainder of the sentence is the sentence predicate. "Believe" is the simple predicate since it is the verb that identifies what action the subject, naturalists, performs.

Subject –Verb Agreement

In order for a sentence to be grammatically correct, its subject and corresponding verb must agree in number; that is, they must be either both plural or both singular. In the case of a subject-verb agreement error, the noun in the subject and the verb in the predicate do not agree in number. The aforementioned sentence is correct because "naturalists" is a plural noun, while "believe" is a plural verb. The sentence would have contained a subject-verb agreement error if it

had read, "Naturalists believes that every aspect of the human experience can be explained in terms of scientific processes," since "naturalists" is a plural noun, while "believes" is a singular verb.

Adding the Plural (s)

As a general rule, plural nouns end in an "s," while singular nouns do not. Conversely, singular verbs typically end in an "s," while plural verbs do not. There are some exceptions to this general rule, however. For instance, "mice" is a plural noun that does not end in "s." Students must take care to always pair singular nouns with singular verbs and plural nouns with plural verbs when composing essays.

Pronoun-Antecedent Errors

Another one of the common grammatical errors that students often make is the pronoun-antecedent error. Pronouns are general nouns such as he, she, it, him, her, they, their, everyone, anyone, and no one. These pronouns rename a previously identified specific noun, known as a pronoun antecedent since it appears before the pronoun. Like subjects and verbs, pronoun antecedents and pronouns must agree in number. A writer should never refer to a singular noun such as "child" using a plural pronoun antecedent such as "they." Therefore, the sentence, "A child must know that they are loved," is grammatically incorrect. To correct this sentence, a writer may either make the pronoun antecedent plural by rewriting the sentence as, "Children must know that they are loved," or the writer may make the pronoun singular by rewriting the sentence as, "A child must know that he or she is loved."

Pronouns

Misuse of the pronouns "they," "them," and "their" has grown increasingly common as society has grown more gender neutral. Writers often use plural pronouns avoid merely referring to an unidentified individual as "he" or "him" as was done in previous times. However, it is incorrect to refer to a singular being as "they," "them," or "their." It is likewise incorrect to assume the gender of someone like a child in the aforementioned example. "He or she" or "him or her" is the grammatically correct method for writing about an individual who may be either gender.

Dangling Modifiers

Finally, students often incorporate the grammatical error known as the dangling modifier into their essays. A dangling modifier is a phrase that is attached to a sentence in which the thing that the phrase is supposed to modify does not appear. For example, the sentence, "By studying hard,

grades will be improved," contains a dangling modifier since it does not identify who will be studying hard. To correct this sentence, the writer must identify the agent who studies. The revised sentence, "When students study hard, their grades will improve," no longer contains a dangling modifier because it identifies students as the agents who will be doing the studying.

Repetitious sentence structure/length

Variety in sentence structure and length gives a rhythm to prose. Repetitious sentence structures and/or length makes the prose choppy.

Colorless verbs and bland adjectives

Passive voice, use of the *to be* verb, is a lost opportunity to use a more interesting and accurate verb when you can. Adjectives can also be used very specifically to add to the sentence. Try to avoid generic or bland adjectives and be specific. Use adjectives that add to the meaning of the sentence.

Lazy transitions/lack of transitions

Transitions link paragraphs and even sentences together. Many different types of transitions and transitional phrases exist in order to provide the most accurate link.

Lack of proofreading

Spell and grammar check do not catch everything, and they are not a replacement for good old fashioned proofreading. These tools do not distinguish between the correct and incorrect use of correctly spelled words, such as "where" and "were." Always proofread yourself.

Contractions, abbreviations and slang

Academic essays are a formal mode of expression. This means that you use English which is much more formal than the language you would use in everyday conversation or, heaven forbid, e-mail or SMSes. You should **never** use slang phrases or contractions in an academic essay. I've listed some common ones below, but avoid anything similar.

As well as contractions and slang, please note that it is not appropriate to use numerals in an essay: talk about the nineteenth century, not the 19th century.

Other abbreviations that are inappropriate include vs, etc., i.e.

X THIS IS WRONG!	✓ THIS IS RIGHT!
can't, don't, wouldn't, haven't, it's	cannot, do not, would not, have not, it is
over the top	excessive, extreme
nice, cute	attractive, pleasant
getting stuck into	becoming involved with, engaged in, absorbed in
in a big way	powerfully, to a large extent
vs.	versus, as opposed to
etc.	among other examples
i.e.	that is, in other words

Incomplete sentences.

Sentence construction is, apparently, a dying art. I see more mangled, fragmented, incomplete, crippled sentences than I do almost any other error. Please bear in mind the following basic rules for non-mutilated sentences:

- Every sentence needs a verb. If it lacks a verb, it is not a sentence.
- "Verb" here means MAIN VERB, which cannot be in a tense or form which renders it a dependent clause rather than a main clause.

X THIS IS WRONG!	✓ THIS IS RIGHT!
Twenty-seven different student errors of maximum atrocity.	I counted twenty-seven different student errors of maximum atrocity.

- The main verb in a sentence CANNOT be in the continuous form, i.e. it cannot have the -ing ending. The present continuous is a dependent tense, i.e. it must be attached to another clause with a proper, non -ing verb.

X THIS IS WRONG!	✓ THIS IS RIGHT!
Placing themselves in the vicinity of taverns and ale-houses.	The students placed themselves in the vicinity of taverns and ale-houses.

Even this is wrong: The students placing themselves in the vicinity of taverns and ale-houses.	OR: Placing themselves in the vicinity of taverns and ale-houses, the students became extremely drunk and failed all their courses.
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- A sub-clause is not a sentence. A phrase which begins with or includes "although", "since", "because", "which", "who", etc, cannot stand alone: it must be attached to a second phrase which completes the thought (and, usually, which contains the main verb).

X THIS IS WRONG!	✓ THIS IS RIGHT!
The alehouse which the students frequent.	This is the alehouse which the students frequent. OR: The alehouse which the students frequent is called <i>The Mended Drum</i> .

- As a random additional point while talking about sentence structure: please watch your tenses! The general convention when undertaking English analysis is to use present tense, and you should make sure that you **stick to one tense throughout your essay!** Moving from past to present within a few sentences, or sometimes within one sentence, is both inelegant and incorrect.

X THIS IS WRONG!	✓ THIS IS RIGHT!
Pratchett believed that students liked to hang around in pubs. OR: Pratchett believed that students like to hang around in pubs.	Pratchett believes that students like to hang around in pubs.

Incorrect use of apostrophes

Apostrophes are the bane of students and markers alike. There are two basic things to remember about apostrophes in academic essays:

- Apostrophes can be used to denote contractions, i.e. a missed-out letter, as in "it's going to rain" for "it is going to rain". You should NEVER have to use them in this sense, since contractions are out of place in formal, academic writing - see above.
- Apostrophes are used to denote a possessive, i.e. something belonging to someone or something else.

- A singular noun takes an apostrophe and an s to denote the possessive. This also applies to singular nouns ending in 's'. Thus "Pratchett's novel" but also "Dickens's novel", since there is only one of either Pratchett or Dickens.
- A plural word ending in 's' simply takes an apostrophe, NOT an additional 's'. Thus "the two writers' novels have points of similarity."
- Irregular plurals which do not end in 's' often take an apostrophe and an 's', e.g. "the children's games", "women's studies".
- APOSTROPHES ARE NEVER USED IN A NON-POSSESSIVE PLURAL! Using an apostrophe in a non-possessive plural is a hanging offense, or should be.
- APOSTROPHES ARE NEVER, EVER USED IN A VERB ENDING! English has many verb endings which end in "s". These are not possessives, ever, under any circumstances. "She walk's" is so wrong it gives me actual pain to contemplate it.
- Nouns ending in a vowel NEVER EVER TAKE AN APOSTROPHE IN A SIMPLE PLURAL! "Zulu's" and "banana's" is dead wrong unless you're talking about things belonging to either the Zulu or the banana; don't do it.



 THIS IS WRONG!	 THIS IS RIGHT!
Terry Pratchetts novel Terry Pratchetts' novel My cats name is Fish. My cats' name is Fish.	Terry Pratchett's novel My cat's name is Fish.
I spend a lot of time correcting student's errors.	I spend a lot of time correcting students' errors.
Knight's in shining armour	Knights in shining armour
The Zulu's were a warlike nation.	The Zulus were a warlike nation, OR Shaka Zulu's nation was warlike.

- I recommend, for a humorous look at heinous apostrophe crime, Bob the Angry Flower, see [Bob's Quick Guide To The Apostrophe, You Idiots!](#)

its/it's

When I die and the autopsy is performed, they will find the words "IT'S=IT IS. ITS=POSSESSIVE" engraved on my heart. It's the favourite student error of all time, and the one for which I am definitely going to have a rubber stamp made, sometime, with bright red ink.

- "It's" is a contraction, it means "it is", and you shouldn't be using it in an academic essay, so that bit is easy.
- "Its" as a possessive (something belonging to it) is an IRREGULAR CONSTRUCTION, i.e. it does NOT follow the usual apostrophe rules. Unlike other singular possessives, "its" DOES NOT TAKE AN APOSTROPHE. "Its" means "belonging to it".

 THIS IS WRONG!	 THIS IS RIGHT!
The book does not live up to the description on it's cover.	The book does not live up to the description on its cover.

No Thesis

Explanation: As simple as it seems, most people often neglect the single most important sentence in the entire essay. A thesis is your basic argument — your "tag line." If you could sum up the debate in your essay in one sentence, this would be it: the thesis.

Fix: While there are always exceptions to the rule, it is advisable to place your thesis statement at the end of your introductory paragraph. It should consist of the general argument and the ways (evidence you plan to use) to prove it.

No Conclusion

Explanation: People sometimes stop writing an essay before it ends. A summary (or denouement) is always required in essay writing.

Fix: Very simple. You do not need to add anything new (although you can) to this paragraph. Just add an extra small paragraph to the end of your paper

summarizing what you have just said. Essentially your introductory paragraph more complex.

Misuse of commas

Explanation: People use commas in different ways. They are generally used in series of nouns and to separate clauses in a sentence. If this confuses you, then seek out a grammar book or ask your professor/teacher for help.

Fix: Find a grammar book (we recommend STRUNK AND WHITE). Look through your essay purely for commas. If you are looking at your text for nothing more than commas, then you are sure to take out unnecessary commas and put in necessary ones.

Spelling errors/Typos

Explanation: This is pretty self-explanatory. Often, people leave spelling mistakes in their essays (which can be typos, but not necessarily), and lose easy points.

Fix: Do not simply use your computer's spell-check feature, as it often overlooks words. Do a read-through of your essay just for spelling.

Punctuation problems

Explanation: People also encounter punctuation problems often in essays, which includes semi-colon, colon, period, misplaced participles, etc.

Fix: Read through your essay solely for punctuation. Make sure you end every sentence with a period, exclamation mark, or question mark in the correct place.

Lack of transitional phrases

Explanation: When new paragraphs begin, they always need a transition, or a sentence ending the previous idea and leading into the next.

Fix: Go through your essay and look at beginning of each paragraph. Read the paragraphs as independent mini-essays. If they make sense alone, they probably have a transition. If not, add just a simple sentence introducing the idea.

Lack of structure

Explanation: Essays, like buildings, need structure. They need a beginning, middle, and an end. In the middle, they need substance.

Fix: Create an outline for your essay. Follow it!

Repetition

Explanation: When an essay discusses the same idea in every single paragraph, it borders on boredom and repetition. The writer obviously has little to say (and probably has done little work).

Fix: Make sure each paragraph has a different focus. Use your outline to guide you.