**6 Basic Writing Errors**

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This handout is meant to help you recognize and fix basic writing errors. I suggest looking at this handout as a final stage in writing, the proofreading stage before turning in a paper. Note that the grammar check and spell check functions on your word processing programs may help you find some of these errors, but they will not help you to consistently fix them.

Read each sentence as its own unit. The easiest way to make sure you are looking at each sentence separately is to **read your paper backwards**. Start with the last sentence and end with the first. Also **read them out loud**; you are more likely to notice mistakes this way.

**Checklist of errors to eliminate** (the pages that follow help you to identify and correct these errors)**:**

* Sentence fragments
  + Sentences must contain a subject and predicate.
* Comma splices and run-on sentences
  + Commas are not sticky enough to combine independent clauses.
* Faulty subject-verb agreement
  + Remove the words between the subject and the verb to make sure they match.
* Shifts in sentence structure
  + Read aloud to find where these shifts cause ambiguous meaning.
* Faulty pronoun reference
  + Remove the words between the pronoun and antecedent to make sure they match.
* Misplaced modifiers or dangling participles
  + Read aloud to listen for ambiguous meaning.

**Lastly:**

* Check that you are using apostrophes and commas correctly.
* Check your spelling.
* Check your diction for consistency.

1. **Sentence Fragments**

A fragment is a group of words masquerading as a sentence. A sentence requires a subject (noun phrase) and a predicate (verb phrase). Someone or thing must do something to be a sentence.

1. **Are you missing a subject? (Verbal as Fragment)**

Turning in a paper late for the third time this semester.

The action taking place here is “turning,” but it is actually a noun. We don’t know who is doing it either.

**Fix #1: Finish the verbal phrase and add a subject.**

*Colin was* turning in a paper late for the third time this semester.

**Fix #2: Let the verbal become a phrase that functions as a subject and add a predicate.**

Turning in a paper late for the third time this semester *will guarantee you a failing grade in the course.*

**Fix #3: The verbal wants to be a participial phrase preceding a new subject and predicate.**

Turning in a paper late for the third time this semester*, Colin decided it was time to seek help for his writer’s block in the COWS.*

1. **Are you missing a predicate? (Noun Clause as Fragment)**

A world without Encounters papers!

Sometimes experienced writers use this kind of fragment for emphasis, but if you did not know you wrote a fragment, you are not in this category.

**Fix #1: Add a verb to create a full sentence.**

A world *emerged* without Encounters papers!

**Fix #2: Add a subject and predicate.**

*As a sophomore, she entered* a world without Encounters papers!

**Fix #3: You were going for effect but are afraid you’ll be graded down: use a colon to add the clause to the sentence it is commenting on.**

*She began her second year of college:* a world without Encounters papers!

1. **Is a dependent clause stepping out on its own? (Subordinate Clause as Fragment)**

I made my hair appointment for 10:00 and was still waiting at 10:30. Although I had to get to class at 11:00.

**Fix #1: The fragment belongs with the sentence. Add it to the end.**

I made my hair appointment for 10:00 and was still waiting at 10:30*, although I had to get to class at 11:00.*

**Fix #2: Add it to the beginning!**

*Although I had to get to class at 11:00,* I made my hair appointment for 10:00 and was still waiting at 10:30.

1. **Comma Splices and Run-Ons**

Have you encountered a scribbled “CS” or “RO” in the margin of a paper? These usually stand for “comma splice” or “run on,” which probably doesn’t help you identify the problem. We often think a run on is just a long sentence, but actually it is two or more sentences fused together without correct punctuation. If you are using a comma to fuse the sentences, this is a comma splice.

**A. Comma Splice**

Emma wanted to do well on her essay, she went to the COWS as soon as she received the prompt.

**Fix #1: Add a conjunction!**

*Because* Emma wanted to do well on her essay, she went to the COWS as soon as she received the prompt.

Emma wanted to do well on her essay, *so* she went to the COWS as soon as she received the prompt.

**Fix #2: Use a semicolon (this emphasizes the relationship between the two clauses).**

Emma wanted to do well on her *essay; she* went to the COWS as soon as she received the prompt.

**Fix #3: Use a period and make two sentences.**

Emma wanted to do well on her essay*. S*he went to the COWS as soon as she received the prompt.

**B. Run-on or Fused Sentence.**

Bradley always went to the COWS with his essays he always got good grades he kept going to the COWS.

In this example, there are three separate sentences all fused into one. Locate the subjects and predicates and separate the sentences with periods, or combine them using the above methods.

Bradley always went to the COWS with his essays. He always got good grades, so he kept going to the COWS.

**C. Comma Splice with Conjunctive Adverb**

Sometimes people do use commas and they think they are using coordinating conjunctions, but they are using conjunctive adverbs.

**Coordinating conjunctions:** *and, but, or, for, not, yet,* and *so.*

The professor seemed nice, but her grading was harsh.

**NOT**

The professor seemed nice, however, her grading was harsh.

**Fixes: Use a coordinating conjunction instead, or try a semicolon.**

The professor seemed nice*; however,* her grading was harsh.

1. **Subject-Verb Agreement**

Most often, people have faulty subject-verb agreement because they have placed a lot of information between the subject and verb, so they lose track. To fix this problem, isolate the subject and the verb from every other part of the sentence and check that they agree in number.

Another aspect of writing that first-years and even seniors encounter *are* their use of vague and general pronouns.

When we isolate the subject and verb, we get:

Another aspect . . . *are* their use of vague and general pronouns.

Though there were several plural nouns in the sentence, the subject, “aspect,” is singular.

Another aspect of writing that first-years and even seniors encounter *is* their use of vague and general pronouns.

1. **Shifts in Sentence Structure (Faulty Predication)**

The subject of learning disabilities are difficult to identify accurately.

In the above sentence, you probably already notice the agreement problem lingering from the last Error Bullet Point.

The subject of learning disabilities *is* difficult to identify accurately.

Great, now the subject and verb agree, but there is still a problem. Do people have trouble identifying the subject of discussion called *learning disabilities*? No, they have trouble identifying learning disabilities. Most likely the writer was warming up at the beginning of the sentence, knowing the topic that would be covered, but now the structure has shifted.

**Fix:**

Learning disabilities are difficult to identify accurately.

1. **Pronoun Reference**

A pronoun must agree in number and in gender with the noun or noun phrase to which it refers. Again, writers sometimes lose track when there are a lot of words between the noun and pronoun.

It can be dangerous if a child, after watching violent cartoons, decides to practice what they saw.

**Fix #1: Pluralize the noun to match the pronoun.**

It can be dangerous if *children*, after watching violent cartoons, decides to practice what they saw.

**Fix #2: The clunky he or she (or alternate he and she)**

It can be dangerous if a child, after watching violent cartoons, decides to practice what *she* saw.

**Fix #3: Sometimes “they” is accepted as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun.**

It can be dangerous if a child, after watching violent cartoons, decides to practice what they saw.

A pronoun should have only one clear antecedent.

Whitman students like comedians because they have a sense of humor.

Who, in the previous sentence, has a sense of humor? “They” could refer to Whitman students or to comedians. Rearrange the sentence, so only one possible antecedent comes before the pronoun.

Because Whitman students have a sense of humor, they like comedians.

One of the most common pronoun problems occurs when students use “this” or “it” with an ambiguous general referent.

Because Whitman students have a sense of humor, they watch comedians, they play practical jokes, and they participate in games. *This* leads to a general sense of happiness.

“This” could refer to any of the nouns in the previous sentence, so you should echo a phrase from that sentence in the following sentence.

Because Whitman students have a sense of humor, they watch comedians, they play practical jokes, and they participate in games. *This* *sense of humor* leads to a general sense of happiness.

1. **Misplaced Modifiers and Dangling Participles**

You can avoid misplacing modifiers by keeping them as close as possible to what they modify.

At the age of thirty he finally wrote an A+ paper with a broken arm.

The broken arm certainly does not belong to the paper, but it is awfully far from the person who has it.

At the age of thirty and with a broken arm, he finally wrote an A+ paper.

Sometimes the noun that is meant to be modified is actually missing from the sentence; then you have a dangling participle.

After debating the issue of tax credits for the elderly, the bill was passed in a close vote.

This sentence reads as if the “bill” is capable of debating. Keep the activity as close to the entity performing the activity as possible.

After debating the issue of tax credits for the elderly, *the Senate passed* the bill in a close vote.