

TWELVE COMMON ERRORS: A STUDENT SELF-EDITING GUIDE

The following list contains only brief examples and explanations intended for you to use as reminders while you are editing your papers. To learn more:

- Take a free grammar or punctuation review workshop offered by the Writing Center.
- Set up an appointment for an individual conference in the Writing Center.
- Confer with your course instructor.
- Look at the grammar and punctuation materials on the Writing Center's Web site.
- Consult a handbook for additional examples and complete explanations.

1. **Sentence Fragments.** Make sure each word group you have punctuated as a sentence contains a grammatically complete and independent thought that can stand alone as an acceptable sentence.

Incorrect: Tests of the Shroud of Turin have produced some curious findings. For example, *the pollen of forty-eight plants native to Europe and the Middle East.*

Revised: Tests of the Shroud of Turin have produced some curious findings. For example, *the cloth contains the pollen of forty-eight plants native to Europe and the Middle East.*

Incorrect: Scientists report no human deaths due to excessive caffeine consumption. *Although caffeine does cause convulsions and death in certain animals.*

Revised: Scientists report no human deaths due to excessive caffeine consumption, although caffeine does cause convulsions and death in certain animals.

2. **Sentence Sprawl.** Too many equally weighted phrases and clauses produce tiresome sentences.

Incorrect: The hearing was planned for Monday, December 2, *but* not all of the witnesses could be available, so it was rescheduled for the following Friday. [There are no grammatical errors here, but the sprawling sentence does not communicate clearly and concisely.]

Revised: The hearing, which had been planned for Monday, December 2, was rescheduled for the following so that all witnesses would be able to attend.

3. **Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers.** Place modifiers near the words they describe; be sure the modified words actually appear in the sentence.

Incorrect: *When writing a proposal,* an original task is set for research [Who is writing a proposal?]

Revised: When writing a proposal, *a scholar sets* an original task for research.

Incorrect: Many tourists visit Arlington National Cemetery, where veterans and military personnel are buried every day from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m.

Revised: Every day from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., many tourists visit Arlington National Cemetery, where veterans and military personnel are buried.

4. **Faulty Parallelism.** Be sure you use grammatically equal sentence elements to express two or more matching ideas or items in a series.

Incorrect: The candidate's goals include winning the election, a health program, and education.

Revised: The candidate's goals include *winning* the election, *enacting* a national health program, and *improving* the educational system.

Incorrect: Some *critics are* not so much opposed to capital punishment as *postponing* it for so long.

Revised: Some *critics are* not so much opposed to sentencing convicts to capital punishment as they *are to postponing* executions for so long.

5. **Unclear Pronoun Reference.** Pronouns must clearly refer to definite referents [nouns]. Use it, they, that, these, those, and which carefully to prevent confusion.

Incorrect: Einstein was a brilliant mathematician. *This* is how he was able to explain the workings of the universe.

Revised: Einstein, *who* was a brilliant mathematician, *used his quantitative ability* to explain the workings of universe.

Incorrect: Because Senator Martin is less interested in the environment than in economic development, she sometimes neglects *it*.

Revised: Because of her interest in economic development, Senator Martin sometimes neglects *the environment*.

6. **Pronoun Agreement.** Be sure that each pronoun agrees in number (singular or plural) with the noun to which it refers (its antecedent or referent).

Incorrect: When *a candidate* runs for office, *they* must expect to have *their* personal life scrutinized.

Revised: When *candidates* run for office, *they* must expect to have *their* personal lives scrutinized.

Incorrect: According to tenets of the “new urbanism,” *everyone* needs to consider the relationship of *their* house to the surrounding community.

Revised: According to tenets of the “new urbanism,” *everyone* needs to consider the relationship of *his or her* house to the surrounding community.

7. **Incorrect Pronoun Case.** Determine whether the pronoun is being used as a subject, object, or possessive in the sentence, and select the pronoun form to match.

Incorrect: Castro’s communist principles inevitably led to an ideological conflict between *he* and President Kennedy.

Revised: Castro’s communist principles inevitably led to an ideological conflict between *him* and President Kennedy.

Incorrect: Because strict constructionists recommend fidelity to the Constitution as written, no one objects more than *them* to judicial reinterpretation.

Revised: Because strict constructionists recommend fidelity to the Constitution as written, no one objects more than *they* [object] to judicial reinterpretation.

8. **Omitted Commas.** Use commas to signal nonrestrictive or nonessential material to prevent confusion, and to indicate relationships among ideas and sentence parts.

Incorrect: When it comes to *eating people* differ in their tastes.

Revised: When it comes to eating, people differ in their tastes.

Incorrect: The Huns who were Mongolian invaded Gaul in 451.

Revised: The Huns, who were Mongolian, invaded Gaul in 451. [“Who were Mongolian” adds information but does not change the core meaning of the sentence because Huns were a Mongolian people; it is therefore *nonrestrictive* or *nonessential* and should be set apart with commas.]

9. **Superfluous Commas.** Unnecessary commas make sentences difficult to read.

Incorrect: Field trips are required, in several courses, such as, botany and geology.

Revised: Field trips are required in several courses, such as botany and geology.

Incorrect: The term “scientific illiteracy,” has become almost a cliché in educational circles.

Revised: The term “scientific illiteracy” has become almost a cliché in educational circles.

- 10. Comma Splice.** Do not link two independent clauses with a comma (unless you also use a coordinating conjunction and, or, but, for, nor, so yet). Instead use a period or semicolon, or rewrite the sentence.

Incorrect: In 1952 Japan's gross national product was one third that of France, by the late 1970s it was larger than the GNPs of France and Britain combined.

Revised: In 1952 Japan's gross national product was one third that of France. By the late 1970s it was larger than the GNPs of France and Britain combined.

Incorrect: Diseased coronary arteries are often surgically bypassed, however half of bypass grafts fail within ten years.

Revised: Diseased coronary arteries are often surgically bypassed; however, half of bypass grafts fail within ten years.

- 11. Apostrophe Errors.** Apostrophes indicate possessives and contractions but not plurals. Caution: its, your, their, and whose are *possessives* (but no apostrophes). It's, you're, they're, and who's are contractions.

Incorrect: In the current conflict *its* uncertain *who's* borders *their* contesting.

Revised: In the current conflict *it is* [it's] uncertain *whose* borders *they are* [they're] contesting.

Incorrect: The Aztecs ritual's of renewal increased in frequency over the course of time.

Revised: The Aztecs' rituals of renewal increased in frequency over the course of time.

- 12. Words Easily Confused.** Effect is most often a noun (the effect) and affect is most often a verb. Other pairs commonly confused: lead/led and accept/except. Check a glossary of usage to find the right choice.

Incorrect: The recession had a negative *affect* on sales.

Revised: The recession had a negative *effect* on sales. (or) The recession *affected* sales negatively.

Incorrect: The laboratory instructor *choose* not to offer detailed *advise*.

Revised: The laboratory instructor *chose* not to offer detailed *advice*.

