

Exploring Common Errors in English Writing

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Mastering the use of one's own language, both written and verbal, is probably the single most effective thing one can do to ensure their academic, professional, and personal success.

The easiest way to reduce grammatical errors in one's writing is to write simple, short sentences.

I didn't say that this is the best way to reduce errors... it's just the simplest way!

However, there is no denying the fact that the simpler the sentence, the easier it is to understand.

Let's start out with a very simple sentence, and then we'll muck it up with various grammatical errors!

noun *verb* *article* *noun* *participle* *verb phrase*

subject *predicate*

People want the law passed.

[ab => abbreviation / contracted form] Please do not use contractions within a formal essay. For example, "YOA" instead of "Young Offenders Act", or "isn't" instead of "is not."

contraction *acronym*

People don't want the YCJA passed. (ab)

People do not want the Youth Criminal Justice Act passed. ✓

[ww => wrong word] Incorrect word used given the context. (For example, then / than, or there / their confusion.)

People do not want the Youth Criminal Justice Act past. (ww)

wrong word

People do not want the Youth Criminal Justice Act passed. ✓

[//] => parallel structure (aka: parallelism): Elements in a sentence that have the same function have not been presented within a consistent grammatical framework. For example: "Smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease, emphysema, and may complicate pregnancy." This sentence is actually constructed to say that smoking causes may complicate pregnancy - which makes rather little sense.

Many Canadians perceive telemarketing calls to be an invasion of privacy and Canada must enforce Bill C-37. (//)

This sentence is actually constructed to suggest that "Many Canadians perceive telemarketing calls to be a Canada must enforce Bill C-37."

Many Canadians perceive telemarketing calls to be an invasion of privacy; thus, Canada must enforce Bill C-37. ✓

Because many Canadians perceive telemarketing calls to be an invasion of privacy, Canada must enforce Bill C-37. ✓

Many Canadians perceive telemarketing calls to be an invasion of privacy. For this reason, Canada must enforce Bill C-37. ✓

[agp => agreement of pronoun and antecedent] A pronoun should always be clearly associated with a specific antecedent. There must be no confusion regarding the antecedent to which a pronoun (such as he, she, this, that, they) is intended to refer.

antecedent *pronoun*

Even though most people want the law passed, they still refuse to table the legislation. (agp)

Even though most people want the law passed, the government still refuses to table the legislation. ✓

[cb / ro => comma blunder / run on] Over-using commas can produce run-on sentences. First seek to separate independent clauses into two separate sentences. If the two independent clauses are closely related, then use a comma to separate these clauses within a single sentence. In general, it is best to conclude a thought before moving onto a new one. This produces shorter sentences - which are easier to write and easier to read.

Even though most people want the law passed, which has been proven in a number of recent surveys and opinion polls, the government, in their foolishness, still refuses to table the legislation. (ro)

A number of recent surveys and opinion polls clearly indicate that most people want the law passed. Yet, the government still refuses to table the legislation. ✓

Another type of comma blunder involves not using commas enough!

For example, I often see students writing introductory clauses that are not set apart from the main part of the sentence by a comma.

Introductory clauses are dependent clauses that provide background information or "set the stage" for the main part of the sentence, the independent clause.

Within the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Section 15 ensures that everyone is entitled to equal treatment under the law. (cb)

introductory clause

Within the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Section 15 ensures that everyone is entitled to equal treatment under the law. ✓

Introducing a "zero article" with a definite article. A zero article refers to nouns that do not require an article. There are a great many rules regarding when to regard a noun as a zero article. Generally speaking, proper, abstract, and uncountable nouns are zero articles. In many cases, it is not the word, but the context that determines whether a word is in fact a zero article.

For example:
 Zero Article: "I really enjoyed math when I was younger." [Referring to the subject of math.]
 Definite Article: "I really enjoyed the math that Ms. Alison taught." [Referring to the specific concepts or units taught by a particular teacher.]

The Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects everyone in the Canadian society. (definite article, abstract noun)

The Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects everyone in Canadian society. ✓

[P] → Punctuation. To hyphenate, or to not hyphenate, compound modifiers.

A compound modifier is defined as two or more words that combine to express a single concept which is then used to modify a noun.

The punctuation convention is to hyphenate compound modifiers whenever they appear in phrases in which the relationship among the words might be ambiguous or confusing. In general, this principle works to produce this rule:

Hyphenate a compound modifier when it appears before a noun.
 Do not hyphenate a compound modifier when it appears after the noun (i.e. in the predicate).

The function of this sentence is to describe the essay. The student wrote a well-researched essay. (compound modifier, noun being modified)

The function of this sentence is to emphasize the research. The student's essay was well researched. (modifier, verb being modified)

[P] → Punctuation. Punctuating a coordinating conjunction (and, but, for, nor, so, yet) or a subordinating conjunction (because, while, since, until, etc.) as if it were a conjunctive adverb [aka transitional expression] (i.e. therefore, thus, however, moreover, furthermore, consequently, etc.).

Because coordinating conjunctions are not separate clauses, they should not be followed by commas. However, transitional expressions do require commas because they actually create a separate phrase!

Myth: You can't begin a sentence with a coordinating conjunction.

Fact: Sure you can! As long as you follow the subordinate clause with an main (i.e. independent) clause!

Here's the same sentence utilizing a conjunctive adverb to create a transition.

Because, she wrote an excellent essay, Sally regained her position at the top of the class. (subordinate clause, main clause (P))

Because she wrote an excellent essay, Sally regained her position at the top of the class. ✓

Sally's poor test results threatened her honours status. However, because she wrote an excellent essay, Sally regained her position at the top of the class.

Sidebar → Sidebar: Conjunctive Adverbs (aka Transitional Expressions)


Conjunctive adverbs are words or phrases that are used to introduce a new independent clause. As they are not conjunctions, they can never be used to join two independent clauses without the use of a semi-colon.

To show time and sequence:
meanwhile, eventually, soon, later, first, second, then, finally, also, too, besides, furthermore, moreover, in addition

To compare and contrast:
likewise, similarly, in the same way, however, nevertheless, still, on the other hand, on the contrary, even so

To show cause and effect:
therefore, as a result, accordingly, consequently, thus, hence, otherwise

To offer examples and conclusions:
for instance, for example, after all, in fact, of course in conclusion, in other words, on the whole, in short



Sentence Fragments and Fragmentary Responses


A sentence fragment is a group of words which sounds like a sentence but does not express a complete thought. Sometimes it has a subject or verb missing. Sometimes it is a phrase or subordinate clause instead of a complete sentence.

Sentence fragments are not only grammatically incorrect but also difficult to understand.

The one type of fragment which may be acceptable, at least in conversation, is a fragmentary response. This is a sentence fragment which answers a question or otherwise responds to a situation in such a way that its meaning is understood even though it is not a complete sentence.

Fragmentary responses should be avoided except in dialogue or very casual writing.

Example: "Who was that woman with you last night?" "Sandy."
(The response is not a complete sentence, but it is understood because it is responding to a specific question.)



Sidebar → Split Infinitives


The *infinitive* form of the *verb* consists of the word "to" followed by the base form of the verb: "to be," "to serve," "to chop," etc.

Inserting a word or words between the "to" and the verb (ie. "be") of an infinitive creates what is known as a **split infinitive**. Split infinitives are in fact growing increasingly acceptable - even in formal writing. Nevertheless, some careful writers still prefer to avoid splitting infinitives altogether.

In general, one should avoid placing long, disruptive modifiers between the "to" and the verb of an infinitive. However, single-word modifiers can be used with discretion, as a sentence can become awkward if a single-word modifier is placed anywhere but between the elements of the infinitive:

The marketing team voted to, before they launched the new software, run an anticipatory ad campaign. (disruptive -- the infinitive should not be split)

The marketing team voted to run an anticipatory ad campaign before they launched the new software.



Sidebar → Dangling Modifiers

A modifier describes, clarifies, or gives more detail about a concept. A **dangling modifier** is a word or phrase that modifies a word that is not clearly stated in the sentence. Consider the following example:

Raised in Nova Scotia, it is natural to miss the smell of the sea.

The introductory phrase in the above sentence looks as if it is meant to modify a person or persons, but no one is mentioned in the sentence. Such introductory *adjective phrases*, because of their position, automatically modify the first *noun* or *pronoun* that follows the phrase -- in this case, "it." The connection in this case is illogical because "it" was not raised in Nova Scotia. One could revise the sentence in a number of ways:

For a person raised in Nova Scotia, it is natural to miss the smell of the sea. (the phrase no longer functions as an adjective)

Raised in Nova Scotia, I often miss the smell of the sea. (the phrase functions as an adjective but now automatically modifies "I," a logical connection)