Writing Elements

A Quick Guide to Grammar and Usage

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Using this Guide

Before we get started, you should note that this guide is, in no way, a comprehensive exploration of grammar and usage. Many guides are available that will provide a much richer and fuller understanding of the components of language usage. Instead, this guide has been designed to help you, in a quick and efficient way, avoid some of the more common errors people make in their writing.

It is a good idea to review this entire guide several times until the information becomes second-nature. Having a good grasp on the basic rules of grammar and usage will make a big difference in how your writing will be received in your academic and professional careers. It may even help your love life, but probably not really help you teach your dog how to say, "Fiddlesticks" (every piece of writing has its limitations).

Enjoy this journey.

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Parts of Speech

All words in the English language have a particular duty to perform in a sentence or clause. These parts work in concert with one another to create meaning. We can look at the way words work in a sentence by either their function or by their form or definition.

By Function:

1. **Verbs:** These words determine the action that is being related (all sentences/clauses must do something).
2. **Nouns and Pronouns:** These words serve as the thing doing the action (subject), or the thing having the action done to it (object).
3. **Modifiers** (Adjectives and Adverbs): These words describe another word to help distinguish or clarify the meaning being related.
4. **Prepositions:** These words shows how one word or phrase relates to another
5. **Articles:** These words are connected to nouns and determine the vagueness of specificity of the noun.
6. **Conjunctions:** These words join clauses together.
7. **Interjections:** These words serve to express strong emotion.

By Form or Definition:

1. **Verb:** An action word. For example: *Speak, run, fight, asked, claimed*, and *rocked*.
2. **Noun:** A part of speech that stands for a person, place, thing, or idea. For example: *Truck, house, loss, ring, air,* and *sandwich.*
3. **Pronoun:** Takes the place of a noun. For example: *I, he, she, we, it, they, them,* and *me*.
4. **Adjective:** Provides information about, clarifies, or describes nouns, pronouns, or other adjectives. For example: *Beautiful, crazy, warm, brittle, awesome,* and *brown.*
5. **Adverb:** Adverbs do very much the same thing as adjectives do except that they clarify and describe verbs (note: almost all adverbs end in *–ly*). For example: *Really, completely, dangerously, imaginatively, productively,* and *honestly.*
6. **Preposition:** These words shows how one word or phrase relates to another. For example: *Up, down, in, out, beneath, between,* and *behind.*
7. **Article:** These words are connected to nouns and determine the vagueness of specificity of the noun. There are only three articles in the English language, *a, an,* and *the.*
8. **Conjunction:** A word that joins two ideas within a sentence. These words fall under two distinct categories, *coordinate conjunctions,* and *subordinate conjunctions.* The list of these words are so small, we will include them all.

- Coordinate conjunctions: *And, or, but, for, yet, so, nor.*
- Subordinate conjunctions: *After, although, as, because, before, if, since, than, that, though, unless, until, when, whether, while.*

9. **Interjections:** These words serve to express strong emotion. For example: *well, ouch, hmmm, wow*, or *humbug*. Swear words could also be categorized as interjections.

Of course, the complexity of these roles goes deeper than this, and the word list, with the exception of articles and interjections, goes on and on. Still, it is important to understand that developing a basic understanding of the way words function and interrelate with each other can help to improve one's writing.

Verbs and Verbals

All sentences in the English language have at least one verb and one subject (implied or stated). While all areas of writing are important, many of the following grammar and usage topics we will address in this guide depend on one's ability to find the verb in a sentence.

While this sounds like an easy process, *verbals*, a verb form with a separate usage, can often be confused as verbs.

Consider this example:

I walk backwards every chance I get.

We have two verbs in this sentence: *walk* and *get*. Yet, consider this sentence:

I get to walk backwards a lot.

How many verbs do we have now? We now only have the verb *get*. The word *walk* is now joined with the word *to* as an infinitive (*to walk*) serving as a noun in the sentence.

There is an easy way to test the sentence to see what words are or are not verbs.

All verbs are tied directly to time. If we change the *tense* of the sentence, we easily find the verb. Why? Because the verb is the only word that will change.

I <u>get</u> to walk backwards a lot. – Present tense

I <u>got</u> to walk backwards a lot. – Past tense

I <u>walk</u> backwards every chance I <u>get</u>. – Present tense

I <u>walked</u> backwards every chance I <u>got</u>. – Past tense

Commonly Misused Words

affect, effect	*Affect*, a verb, means to influence or change in some way. *Effect*, a noun, refers to the result of circumstances or actions.
feel, fill	*Feel* is a verb that means to sense or detect; *fill* is a verb referring to the act of causing a container to be full.
it's its	*It's* is a contraction of the clause "it is," and *its* is the possessive form of *it*.
passed, past	*Passed* means to have moved beyond a certain point; *past* refers to a moment or era that has elapsed in time.
personal, personnel	The adjective *personal* describes nouns that belong to particular individuals. The noun *personnel* is used in reference to a specific group of a company's employees.
principal, principle	*Principal* can be a noun or adjective, and it refers to the head of a group or describes a noun's rank or importance. *Principle* is a noun that refers to an established law or rule of conduct.
quiet, quite	The word *quiet* can be used as an adjective or noun, and it refers to a lack of noise. *Quite* is a synonym for the word *very*.
than, then	*Than* compares two words, but *then* tells when an action or event has occurred.
their, there, they're	*There*, like the word *to*, refers to location, while *their* refers to ownership. *They're* is a contraction of the words *they are*.
threw, through	*Threw* is the past tense of the verb *throw*, which means to propel from one's hand in a sudden movement. *Through* is a preposition that refers to spatial or temporal relationship.
two, too, to	*To* is a preposition that defines direction; *Too* means either *also*, or it refers to excess; *Two* is a number.
weather, whether	*Weather* is the condition of the climate or atmosphere; *whether* is a synonym for *if*.
you, your, you're:	Like *they're*, *you're* is a contraction; in this case, it combines the words *you are*. *Your*, like *their*, refers to ownership. *You* is a second-person pronoun used when the speaker is referring directly to the listener.

Point of View: First, Second, and Third Person

Point of view or *person* describes the perspective of a piece of writing. In most academic writing, *third person* is considered to be the most respectable, and in many of your academic assignments, it will be the only one acceptable. *First person* is good for more informal methods of communication like emails, personal letters, and so on. *Second person* should be reserved for instruction only.

Remember that *first person* uses the pronouns *I* or *we*; *second person*, *you*; and *third person*, *he*, *she*, *it*, *one*, or *they*.

To avoid confusion, select the point of view that works best for your writing and stay consistent. (For formal essays, one should almost always write in third person.)

For example:

First person:	I love to spend time with my pet donkey.
Second person:	You love to spend time with your pet donkey.
Third person:	She loves to spend time with her pet donkey.

Past and Present Tenses

Tense tells readers whether the event occurred in the past or is occurring presently. While there are no hard, fast rules determining which tense to use, it is important that a writer use one tense consistently throughout a piece of writing.

> **Remember, the verb of the sentence determines what *tense* the sentence is in.**

Chase, for instance, is an example of a *present-tense verb*, while *chased* is an example of a *past-tense* verb. When verbs shift between past and present tense, readers can get confused. Any one tense works well for most cases, but always stay consistent.

For example:

Wrong:	I ask her what she was thinking.
Right:	I asked her what she was thinking.
Right:	I ask her what she is thinking.

Clichés

Clichés are phrases that have been used so often in our language that they lack originality and specificity. *Clichés* you may know include "sick as a dog" or "head over heels" among dozens of others. *Clichés* come naturally because they are familiar, but you should avoid them in formal writing and stick to clear, original phrasing. Avoiding *clichés* will help your readers take your writing much more seriously.

Sexist Language

In an academic environment, it is important that we avoid language that excludes certain groups of people. We need to, whenever possible, avoid language that could be determined to undermine or ignore individuals due to their race, religion, gender, political affiliation, sexual preference, nationality, and so on. For the following example, we will focus on sexist language.

If we were to say:

> An individual must inform his supervisor and mark the time on his time sheet when he takes a break.

We certainly cannot assume that all people who wish to take a break are of one gender and not the other.

A correct way to write this would be:

> An individual must inform his or her supervisor and mark the time on his or her time sheet when he or she takes a break.

Still, the correct option does seem a bit difficult to read. There are ways one can make this sentence flow more easily without resorting to *sexist language*. Consider these options:

1. Pluralize the sentence:

   Individuals must inform their supervisors and mark the time on their time sheets if they take a break.

2. Change the sentence structure:

   An individual who takes a break should inform his or her supervisor and mark the time on the time sheet.

Slang/Jargon

Slang is the very informal language we sometimes use with our close friends or family. Because it is often specific to a community or group and because of its casual tone, *slang* should always be avoided when writing formally. Remember, the language you use determines the way people see you as a person.

Jargon is generally a way to speed up a conversation with others who are familiar with specific terminology. This will limit one's audience to only those in that specific group, and, like *slang*, should be avoided in formal writing.

> Wrong: I feel like my life began at ATI.

> Right: I feel like my life began at the Army Training Institute.

Subject/Verb Agreement

We have said it before, but it is important we say it again: All sentences in the English language have a verb and a subject. The verb identifies the action taking place while the subject identifies what or whom is performing the action. It is important that we match plural subjects with plural verbs and that we match singular subjects with singular verbs.

A *present-tense verb* should always agree with its subject in person (first, second, or third) and number (singular or plural). For instance, you might say, "I walk, but he walks." The subjects in these examples (I and we, respectively) determine whether or not the verb ends in –s.   It's likely that you intuitively know which verb form is correct when it's clear which noun functions as the verb's subject, but longer sentences can be tricky.

First, you want to identify the sentence's verb and then determine whom or what is performing the action—that is the verb's subject. Once you have identified both, it is easier to determine whether or not the subject and verb work together.

Consider this sentence:

> My friends, who never call unless they're curious about my most recent financial disaster, are visiting.

If we simplify the sentence by getting rid of the long description about the friends, we have this:

> My friends are visiting.

With the subject, *friends,* and its verb, *are,* right next to each other, it is clear that there is subject/verb agreement in this sentence.

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

Pronouns stand in for nouns, and they consist of words like *I, me, you, he, she, it, him, her, they,* and *them*. A pronoun's antecedent is the noun to which the pronoun refers. It is important that pronouns match their antecedents in number, meaning that either they must both be singular or they must both be plural.

Consider this example:

> The bird was locked in his cage.

The pronoun, *his,* refers back to the noun, *bird*. *Bird* is singular, so *his* is also singular.

Consider a second example:

> The birds were locked in their cages.

In this example, the pronoun, *their*, refers back to *birds*, and both words are plural. These sentences are correct grammatically.

Consider a final example:

> The birds were locked in his cages.

Either this sentence is grammatically problematic, or these birds have sequestered themselves inside habitats that do not belong to them.

Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments are one of the most common errors in student writing. A sentence fragment is either a sentence lacking a verb or a subject, or a subordinate clause that is not matched with an independent clause. Does this sound confusing? It can be, but learning to avoid sentence fragments is one of the easiest ways to improve the structure of one's writing.

A complete sentence has to do something (verb) and has to have someone or something perform the action (subject). If a clause starts with subordinating conjunction such as *after, although, because, before, even though, if, since, than, that, though, unless, until, when, where, whether,* or

while, it is a subordinate clause and needs to be paired with another clause (an independent one) to be complete.

> Wrong: Because we were late to the party. My friend was angry.

> Right: Because we were late to the party, my friend was angry.

Run-On Sentences

A *run-on sentence* is the grammatical opposite of a sentence fragment, and is just as common in student writing. Run-on sentences occur when we join independent clauses without the correct punctuation.

Run-on sentences take two forms: fused sentences and comma splices.

In a fused sentence, there is no punctuation between the two independent clauses, as in this example:

> I like ferrets they are stinky animals.

In a comma splice, the two independent clauses are separated only by a comma, as in this example:

> I like ferrets, they are stinky animals.

For independent clauses to appear side-by-side in a single sentence, you must join them either with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, not, for, so,* or *yet*) or with a semicolon:

> I like ferrets, but they are stinky animals.

You might also transform one of the independent clauses into a subordinate clause by beginning it with a subordinating conjunction such as: *after, although, because, before, even though, if, since, than, that, though, unless, until, when, where, whether,* or *while*. For example:

> Although I like ferrets, they are stinky animals.

Another option is to divide the independent clauses into two separate sentences:

> I like ferrets. They are stinky animals.

Commas

Commas are used to indicate divisions between certain grammatical elements of a sentence. They are, without a doubt, the most confusing and misused form of punctuation. Here are some rules that might help:

1. Insert a comma before a coordinating conjunction that joins independent clauses:

    I like to dance, and I also like to sing.

2. When a subordinate clause is followed by an independent clause, use a comma to join them:

    Although I can't sing well, I dance often.

3. When items appear in a series, insert a comma between each:

    My dancing alarms my friends, coworkers, and neighbors.

4. Use a comma after a direct address:

    Mr. Lipton, I apologize for breaking your lamp.

There are other grammatical elements that should be set off with commas, but these are among the most common.

5. You should refrain from using commas between the subject and verb of a sentence, as in this flawed example:

    Dance moves that require a lot of jumping, are my favorite.

6. You should also avoid using commas between two compound elements that are at first glance mistaken for two independent clauses, as in this incorrect sentence:

    I danced my heart out, and then attended a group meeting.

Semicolons

Semicolons are often misunderstood, but they don't typically alter the meaning in a clause like some forms of punctuation. For this reason, writers tend to love them. Still, they often get overused.

There are two official uses for the semicolon. The first use is to join two independent clauses, and the second use is to divide a series of items that contain punctuation.

For example:

> It's not my fault that we're late; you're the one who wouldn't get off the phone.

> I enjoy sailing with my friends; watching movies, tasting wine, and shopping with my family; and walking on the beach alone.

Abbreviations

We often use *abbreviations* in our personal and professional lives. So much so, that we forget they can be confusing to others. In your writing, remember to cue your readers who may not understand what you are trying to discuss.

Commonly used abbreviations are acceptable in formal writing. These include but are not limited to personal titles such as Mr., Ms., Mrs., Jr., PhD, Rev., St., and Prof.

Acceptable abbreviations that are not titles of persons include a.m, p.m., No., $, AD, and BC. When abbreviations are not commonly known, writing can become confusing.

Numbers

There are only two rules regarding *numbers*. Still, they are worth keeping an eye on.

1. Write out numbers nine and under unless the number includes a decimal.

2. Write out a number that is the first word of a sentence unless the number is too large, in which case you should rework the sentence.

Wrong: My neighbor has <u>9</u> cats and <u>fourteen</u> dogs. <u>7</u> of the dogs are Rottweilers.

Right: My neighbor has <u>nine</u> cats and <u>14</u> dogs. <u>Seven</u> of the dogs are Rottweilers. Some

General Advice

1. Consistency is key. Even if you do not follow the rules precisely, the way you do structure and order your words should remain the same throughout the document you are working with.
2. If an instructor marks you wrong for a particular error, take that error seriously so you can fix it next time. If you are not sure how to fix it, ask your instructor for guidance or visit the Writing Center.
3. Consistency is key. Some things just have to be said more than once.