

Grammar and Writing Mechanics Review Part II ~ 10 Most Common Grammar Problems

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Problems that crop up when combining sentences

1. Comma splices
2. Misplaced modifiers
3. Dangling modifiers
4. Lack of subject-verb agreement
5. Faulty parallelism
6. Tense shifts
7. Overuse of passive voice
8. Floating pronouns
9. Confused words
10. Listphobia

1. The Comma Splice

- A writer creates a **comma splice** by joining 2 independent clauses with a comma instead of a conjunction.

Comma splice- It was a pleasure to meet you, I hope we can get together again soon.

Comma splice- The Internet has revolutionized the publishing business, online sales of books have skyrocketed in the past few years.

3 Fixes for the Comma Splice

1. **Add a conjunction** between the 2 clauses.
2. Start a **new sentence**.
3. If the independent clauses have a **closely related topic**, insert a **semicolon** between the two.

- It was a pleasure to meet you, **and** I hope we can get together again very soon.
- The Internet has revolutionized the publishing business; online sales of books have skyrocketed in the past few years.

2. Misplaced Modifiers

- Modifiers should be kept next to the word(s) to which they refer.
- Too great of a physical distance between modifier and object causes confusion because it's not clear to which word the modifier is referring.



2. Misplaced Modifiers

- Modifiers are words (adjectives or adverbs) that limit, qualify, or describe another word.
- **Adjectives** modify nouns
 - New car, old book, interesting class
- **Adverbs** modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs
 - She walked slowly
 - He drove a very fast car
 - The bride moved quite slowly down the aisle.

Adverbs You Can Do Without

- **Intensifiers** such as *very*, *extremely*, and *really*, *actually* are unnecessary, imprecise, and easily misinterpreted. Eliminating these weak words will improve your writing.
- Also eliminate **expletive constructions** such as “there are.”

Wordy: “There are several authors that address this topic.”

Simple revision: “Several authors have addressed this topic.”

- Eliminating the empty expletives makes your writing more dynamic.

Misplaced Modifiers & Cousins

Dangling and Squinting

- I almost failed every art class I took.
- I failed almost every art class I took.
- We only collected 27 signatures on the petition.
- We collected only 27 signatures on the petition.
- **Dangling-** trying to modify something that has been left out of the sentence.
- **Squinting:** Placing the modifier between two likely choices.

3. Dangling Modifiers

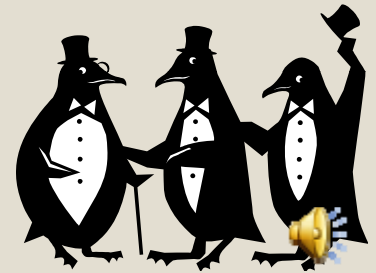
- Most often occur at the beginnings and ends of sentences
 - ◆ Usually indicated by an *-ing* verb or a *to + verb* phrase

Example: Hiking the trail, the birds chirped loudly.

(Were the birds hiking the trail?)

Example: Walking to the campsite in February, my nose began to run. (Was your nose out of breath after it broke

into a run? Did your nose get to the campsite before the rest of your body?)



Dangling modifiers can be repaired

- ◆ By making the subject of the modifier the subject of the independent clause:
I was walking to the campsite in February, and my nose began to run.
- By placing the subject of the action within the dangling phrase:
As **our group** was hiking the trail, the birds chirped loudly.

Squinting Modifier

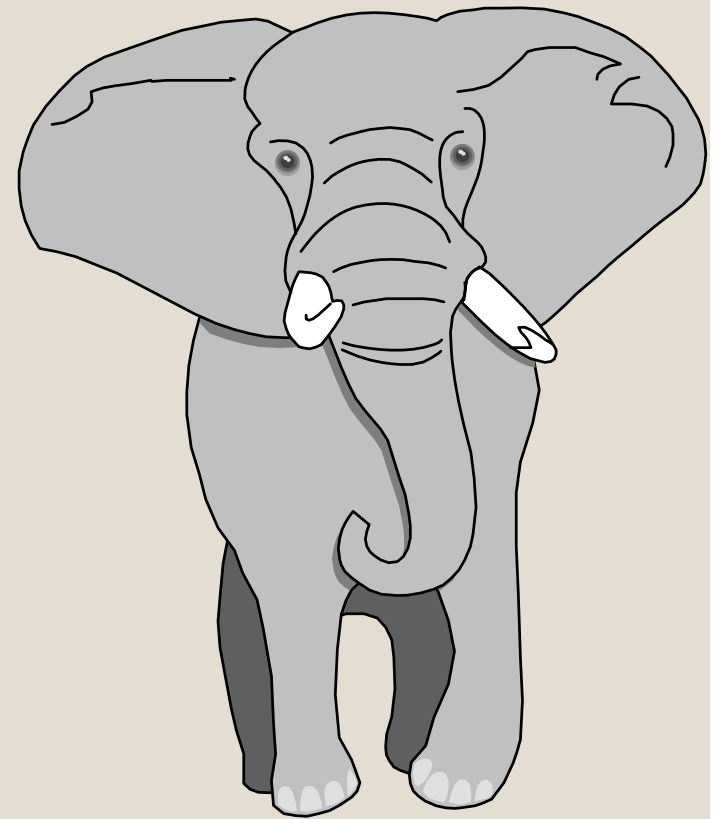
a modifier sandwiched between two possible targets

- Children who laugh rarely are shy.
 - Did the writer mean children who laugh infrequently are often shy, or that children who laugh often are typically not shy?
- It's impossible for the reader to figure out what the writer intended to say.

Misplaced Modifiers

The other day I
shot an elephant
in my pajamas.
How he got in my
pajamas I'll never
know.

-- Groucho Marx



Misplaced Modifiers

One-word modifiers are easily misplaced.
Be sure to keep these words beside the
word(s) they are modifying.

only just hardly simply
even nearly merely almost

Explain the meaning of each sentence:



- **Almost** everyone in the class passed the calculus exam.
- Everyone in the class **almost** passed the calculus exam.
- Which sentence indicates that **everyone** in the class failed the exam?

Location, Location, Location: It's not just important for real estate!

- Which of these projects is unlikely to pay you as a research assistant?
- Our project received a grant for nearly one million dollars.
- Our project nearly received a grant for one million dollars.

Nearly received means
they didn't get the money!



4. Lack of Subject-Verb Agreement

- Subjects and verbs must **agree in number and tense**
- Singular subjects require singular nouns
- Plural subjects require plural nouns

- Straightforward until dealing with compound subjects or irregular forms...

4. Lack of subject-verb agreement

- **Irregular plurals such as data, phenomena, media**
 - data were, media have, phenomena are
- **Tricky with collective nouns that you think are plural but are singular**
 - the committee wants a resolution...
 - the committees want a resolution...

4. Lack of Subject-verb Agreement

- Also tricky when the **verb** is far from the **subject** within the sentence.
 - The television **medium**, which has all the power in the nation and abuses it consistently, **uses its** influence for ill more often than good.
 - The **media**, which has all the power and abuses it consistently, **use their** influence for ill more often than not.

BUT, these examples show poor sentence structure. The reader expects to find the verb close to subject and is likely disregard the intervening information.

5. Faulty Parallelism

- When two sentence elements are similar in meaning or importance they should be expressed in parallel form.

Faulty: The agency **provides** services for families and **has consulted** on issues of elder home care.

Revised: The agency not only provides family services but also consults on issues of elder...

5. Parallel structure

- **Pairs of words** or **series of words** should have the same form and tense = parallel structure
- **Don't** mix forms – that creates a sour note

Faulty: As project manager, you will be expected to prepare reports quickly, accurately, and in a detailed manner.

Revised: As project manager, you will be expected to prepare reports quickly, accurately, and thoroughly.

5. Repeat a word or phrase to create parallel structure

- The academic coach suggested first-year students should ensure that they get plenty of sleep, they eat a balanced diet, and do mental warm-ups before a test.
- The academic coach suggested that first-year students ensure that they get plenty of sleep, they eat a balanced diet, and they do mental warm-ups before a test.

Parallel structure creates rhythm in your writing.

5. Items in a list need parallel form

- Social work is an excellent field for those interested in helping others fulfill their potential, to work toward social justice, find ways to improve the quality of life for all, and to find meaning and a purpose in life.
- Social work is an excellent field for those interested in help~~ing~~ others fulfill their potential, fight~~ing~~ for social justice, ensur~~ing~~ a better quality of life for all, and find~~ing~~ purpose in life.

Alternate revision uses infinitive phrases from original sentence

Original: Social work is an excellent field for those interested in helping others fulfill their potential, to work toward social justice, find ways to improve the quality of life for all, and to find meaning and a purpose in life.

Revision: Social work is an excellent field for those who seek to help others fulfill their potential, to fight for social justice, to ensure a better quality of life for all, and to find meaning and purpose in life.

6. Wrong tense or verb form

- Tricky with irregular verb forms
- *After class, I like to **lay** on the couch and watch TV.*
 - After class, I **lay** my work on the table and **lie** on the couch.
 - Lie = recline
 - Lay = place in a certain position
 - People lie, chickens lay

6. Avoid Verb Tense Shifts

- Changes in verb tense help readers understand the temporal (time) context of the action.
 - But, when the tense shifts within a sentence and without apparent reason, the shift can cause confusion.
 - Verb tense should be consistent within a sentence

Faulty: The director **planned** the program and the staff **delivers** each session.

Revised: The director **planned** the program and the staff **delivered** each session.

- He *wants* to go because he *hopes* to find his true calling.
- He *wanted* to go because he *hoped* to find his true calling.
- But, when the indy clause is in the future, repeating the future in the dependent clause is awkward, so shift to the present tense:
- He *will go* because he *hopes* to find his true calling.



- Similarly, when the main verb either *present perfect* or *future perfect tense*, switch to *present tense*:
- He *has gone* because he *hopes* to find his calling.
- He *will have gone* because he *hopes* to find his calling.
- If the main verb is *past perfect*, the dependent verb is *past tense*:
- He *had gone* because he *hoped* to find his true calling.

7. Over Use of Passive Voice

- ◆ Passive voice puts the emphasis on the *thing* or *what* that is receiving the action rather than emphasizing who is doing the action
- ◆ two indicators
 - ◆ "to be" verbs—is, are, was, were
 - ◆ "by _____"
- ▣ *Not always a bad thing*, but don't over use passive voice

How might you improve the following sentence?

The decision that was reached by the committee was to postpone the vote.

Better: The committee reached the decision to postpone the vote.

Best: The committee decided to postpone the vote.



How might you correct the following sentence?

The disk drive of the computer was damaged by the electrical surge.

Better: The electrical surge damaged the disk drive of the computer.

Best: The electrical surge damaged the computer's disk drive.

Be careful!



anthropomorphism

- Noun: The representation of objects or activities as having human traits
- The research reports...
- Researchers have reported...

8. Avoid floating pronouns:

ANCHOR TO A DEFINITION

- **They, this, it, these...** used without definition can be confusing
 - Reader has to backtrack to find what the pronoun refers to
- The crisis hotlines are staffed 24 hours a day by trained volunteers. **These** are important to offering immediate contact with survivors.
- **These what? Hotlines or volunteers?**



9. Use Precise, Correct Language

A physicist wouldn't use *mass* when he or she means *weight*. (*shudder!*)📣

Similarly, the social worker should not use *conceptualize* (i.e., the actual biological process of thought) when he or she means *thought of* in this way.

SpellCheck won't flag misused words

9. Did you mean to say that?

Did your survey **canvas** or **canvass** the neighborhood?

Is this a **principle** point or a **principal** point?

Do you want to **insure** success or **ensure** success?

Do you want to **assure** a friend or **insure** a friend?

Was it **continual** or was it **continuous**?

Did you receive a **compliment** or a **complement**?

Should I be **censured** or **censored**?

Should the policy be **altered** or **altared**?

Use Precise Language

See chapter 8 of NASW Press author guidelines for a great list of easily confused and misused words

<http://www.naswpress.org/authors/guidelines/08-tools.html>

- Check it out – Merriam-Webster's Online

Sentence Combining

- Why should we know about sentence combining?
 - ◆ To build clarity
 - ◆ To avoid wordiness
 - ◆ To avoid redundancy
- Keys to sentence combining:
 - ◆ Create adjectives
 - ◆ Create properly placed modifying clauses
 - ◆ Eliminate unnecessary or repetitive phrases

Consider the following paragraph:

The boy struggled to ride his bike. The boy is four years old and he is feisty. The bike is new and it is a light blue color. The boy received the bike for his birthday. He struggled for two hours. However, he was unsuccessful in riding the bike.

Sentence Combining

- **The boy struggled to ride his bike. The boy is four years old and he is feisty. The bike is new and it is a light blue color. The boy received the bike for his birthday. He struggled for two hours. However, he was unsuccessful in riding the bike.**
- **The feisty four-year-old boy struggled unsuccessfully for two hours to ride his new light blue birthday bike.**

Sentence Combining

The animal trainer dove into the pool. The trainer was skilled and athletic. She was excited when she dove into the pool. She swam with two dolphins. The dolphins were babies. The dolphins were playful. The trainer swam with the dolphins for over an hour. When the trainer swam with the dolphins, she was happy.

Sentence Combining

The animal trainer dove into the pool. The trainer was skilled and athletic. She was excited when she dove into the pool. She swam with two dolphins. The dolphins were babies. The dolphins were playful. The trainer swam with the dolphins for over an hour. When the trainer swam with the dolphins, she was happy.

- The skilled, athletic animal trainer excitedly dove into the pool and happily swam for over an hour with two playful baby dolphins.

Sentence Combining

The blizzard contained strong winds and heavy snow. During the snowstorm, the roof of the town library collapsed. The roof of the post office did the same. The blowing snow covered the county roads. Schools cancelled classes due to the white-out conditions.

Sentence Combining

The blizzard contained strong winds and heavy snow. During the snowstorm, the roof of the town library collapsed. The roof of the post office did the same. The blowing snow covered the county roads. Schools cancelled classes due to the white-out conditions.

- The blizzard, containing strong winds and heavy snow, caused the roofs of the town library and the post office to collapse, created white-out conditions on county roads, and forced schools to cancel classes.

Or when verb is far from subject

- The *data*, which have been examined and reinterpreted inconsistently, *were* modeled using ordinary ...
- data = plural population =
singular
- datum = singular staff = both
- media = plural committee =
singular
- medium = singular

4. Fused sentence

- = 2 independent clauses that are smashed together w/o a conjunction, colon, or semi-colon.

“Researchers investigated several possible programs for effectiveness **then they chose the most affordable.”**

“Researchers investigated several possible programs for effectiveness, **and then they chose the most affordable.”**

4.

Run on, fused sentence

- **Run-on sentences are sentences that run-on forever, and they are sentences that should have been two or three sentences but the writer didn't stop to sort them out, leaving the reader feeling exhausted by the sentence's end, which is too long in coming– despite how happy the reader is to finally arrive at that long-awaited point.
(Get the picture?)**

Grammar Check

- Use grammar tools built into Word
 - Select option to check for passive voice
- Proofread
 - Allow time lapse before proofreading
 - Proof from hard copy
 - Read aloud
 - Have someone else read your paper
 - Don't argue with your reviewer!

**Some final words on grammar
from a student essay (not
SOSW!)**

“ I care about my grammar. She died two years ago, but I still care deeply about my grammar.”

Grammar Resources

- UNC SOSW Grammar Tutorial
- CCC Guide to Grammar & Writing
 - <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/>
- Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue Univ.
 - <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/>
- ESL Englishpage.com Verb Tutorial
 - http://www.englishpage.com/verbpage/verbte_nseintro.html