

Avoid the Top 10 errors in writing

1. Incomplete Sentences

English sentences are composed of a subject (a noun or pronoun) and a predicate (containing a verb).

(noun)	(verb)
<i>LAUSD</i>	<i>planned budget cuts.</i>
(subject)	(predicate)

Nouns name people (John Deasy), places (Los Angeles), things (boxes), ideas (justice), and activities (running).

Verbs describe action (pushes, sends, reaches) and states of beings (is, are, was, were).

Commands (“Make these copies.”) are complete sentences, though they appear to be missing a subject. The subject *you* is implied.

(You)	<i>Go for coffee</i>
(subject)	(predicate)

When a group of words lacks either a subject or a predicate, the result is a sentence fragment, or incomplete sentence.

Fragment: “And walked aimlessly for hours.” (no subject)

Fragment: “The man who left his briefcase in the car.” (no predicate)

In advertising and magazines, writers use sentence fragments freely; however, in traditional business writing we don’t usually use sentence fragments.

2. Run-on Sentences and Comma Splices

When two sentences run together as one, the result is a run-on sentence.

Error: “Milton used his accounting skills to correct the financial errors he found them right before his boss presented them.”

However, don’t try to repair this with just a comma. When you do that, it’s called a comma splice and it’s incorrect.

Error: “Milton used his accounting skills to correct the financial errors, he found them right before his boss presented them.”



Solutions

Separate the two sentences with a period.

Correct: "Milton used his accounting skills to correct the financial errors. He found them right before his boss presented them."

Join the two sentences with a semicolon.

Correct: "Milton used his accounting skills to correct the financial errors; he found them right before his boss presented them."

Join the two sentences with a comma and a conjunction.

Correct: "The mills needed raw materials and the workers needed jobs."

Join the two sentences with a semicolon and a conjunctive adverb followed by a comma.

Correct: "The mills needed raw materials; however, the workers needed jobs."

Join the two sentences with a subordinate conjunction.

Correct: "The office needed new supplies so the staff could work more efficiently."

Join the two sentences with a relative pronoun.

Error: "Don Miller is an engineer, he banished the slide rule from our offices."

Correct: "Don Miller is an engineer who banished the slide rule from our offices."

3. Modifiers

Sentences must have their parts in the right places to work properly.

Error: "Sarah placed both hands on the lectern, rising to speak." (This sounds as if the lectern is rising to speak.)

Correct: "Sarah, rising to speak, placed both hands on the lectern."

"Rising to speak, Sarah placed both hands on the lectern."

Since "rising to speak" is a modifier that describes "Sarah," you should keep it close to the subject.

Always keep such modifiers close to the words they modify, to prevent distorted or silly meanings.

Error: "He left his car behind, smoking a cigar."

Correct: "Smoking a cigar, he left his car behind."

However, avoid using dangling modifiers. A modifier is said to "dangle" when added incorrectly at the beginning or end of a sentence.

Error: "You can buy the watch at a discounted price, which has a platinum bracelet."

Error: "Together with the platinum bracelet, you can buy the watch at a discounted price."

Correct: "You can buy the watch with the platinum bracelet at a discounted price."



4. Subject-Verb Agreement

By acquired habit as speakers of English, we usually choose verbs that agree with the subjects of our sentences.

“Factories sometimes cost (not *costs*) too much in the suburbs.”
(plural) (plural)

“Each of the workers leaves (not *leave*) at 5:00 p.m.”
(singular) (singular)

Sometimes, however, we trip up by attaching a singular subject to a plural verb or vice versa.

Other easily mistaken singular subjects are

- Either/or
Example: “Either Melissa or Jane answers (not answer) our needs.”
- Everyone
Example: “Everyone knows the head supervisor.”
- Subjects separated by *or*
Example: “The computer or the teletype causes (not cause) static on the telephone.”

Some plural nouns have singular meanings.

Example: “Economics is difficult but enlightening.”
(singular)

Other plural nouns include aesthetics, checkers, mathematics, mumps, physics, politics, and statistics (when referred to as a field of study).

Collective nouns can take singular or plural verbs, depending on whether they refer to a group as a unit or as a collection of individuals.

Examples: “The team was organized by Jensen.” (a group)
“The team play their hearts out every game.” (individuals)

5. Pronoun Choice

Pronouns in a sentence must agree with the noun to which they refer.

Example: “Every one of the packages lost its wrapper.” (*not* their)

Use a plural noun to refer to two nouns joined by *and*.

Example: “Frenkel and Turner gave their resignation speeches together.”



Use a singular pronoun to refer to subjects preceded by *each* or *every*.

Example: "Each manager and each supervisor gave his or her approval of the project."

Use a singular pronoun to refer to nouns separated by *either/or* or *neither/nor*.

Example: "Either the door or the hallway needs its annual coat of paint."

When a singular and a plural noun are separated by *or*, the pronoun reference (and verb form) agrees with the noun closest to the verb.

Examples: "Common stock or apartments seem to be likely investment vehicles if their value remains steady this year."

"Apartments or common stock seems to be likely investment vehicles if their value remains steady this year."

Use a singular or a plural pronoun to agree with collective nouns such as *committee*, *crew*, *group*, *majority*, *number*, and *team*, depending on whether it refers to a group as one unit or as a collection of independent individuals.

Examples: "The crew wins another of its many races"

"The crew are ready to receive their ribbons."

Use a singular pronoun to refer to everyone.

Example: "Everyone has a right to express his or her own opinion."

Use a singular pronoun to refer to *some* or *most*, depending on whether some or most refers to singular or plural nouns.

Examples: "Some of the sport has lost its excitement."

"Some of the sports have lost their excitement."

Use *I*, *we*, *you*, *he*, *she*, *it*, and *they* as subjects.

Example: "He, she, and I went to the personnel office."

Note that these same forms are used after linking verbs: "The best worker is she." (She is the best worker.)

Use *me*, *us*, *you*, *him*, *her*, *it*, and *them* as direct objects, indirect objects and objects of prepositions.

Examples: "The job affected him and her in positive ways."

"Send Oscar and me the bill."

"Send the bill to Oscar and me."

Use *who* as a subject.

Examples: "Who tells the boss what to do?"

"I want to meet the person who tells the boss what to do."

Use *whom* as an object.

Example: "Give the package to whom you wish."



The indefinite pronouns *few*, *several*, and *all* take plural verbs and pronoun references.

Examples: “Few of the employees dislike their bosses.”

“Several of their friends board their pets.”

“All the boxes still sit in their appropriate places.”

Indefinite pronouns such as *none* and *someone* take singular verbs and pronoun references.

Examples: “None of the men knows his grandfather’s place of birth.”

“Someone continues to leave his or her coat on my chair.”

6. Commas

Use commas before and after phrases or clauses when the information in them offers added facts about the subject. If the phrase could be omitted because it isn’t essential to the meaning of the sentence, use commas to set it off.

Ex.: “Luke Sabet, who began his career in electrical engineering, is the owner of the firm.” The clause between the commas does not change the meaning of the sentence. It just adds information to it, so you do use commas.

“All employees who work this Sunday will be paid overtime.” In this sentence the clause “who work this Sunday” could not be omitted. It is essential to the meaning of the sentence so we do not use commas.

7. Semicolons

Use a semicolon to link two closely related complete sentences. Independent clauses must always precede and follow a semicolon.

Ex.: “We cannot predict how long the study will take; we have never conducted this type of analysis before.”

Use a semicolon to precede independent clauses that begin with transition words such as *however*, *moreover*, *therefore*, *consequently*, or *for example*.

Ex.: “This training manual is confusing; moreover, it lacks an index and a table of contents.”

Use a semicolon to separate items in a list or series when any of those items contains a comma.

Ex.: “The three people authorized to sign checks are Lorenzo Silva, the president; Shannon Wooten, the treasurer; and Jennifer Sims, the office manager.”

8. Colons

Use a colon after a name in the salutation of a business letter.



Ex.: “Dear Ms. Clipper:”

Use a colon to link a list or series to its connecting thought.

Ex.: “Six states are participating in the conference: New Jersey, Virginia, New York, Illinois, Texas, and California.

It is incorrect to use a colon after a preposition or after a form of the verb *to be*.

Ex.: “Distribute these forms to human resources, finance, sales, and I.T. “
“The departments that need these forms are human resources, finance, sales, and I.T.”

However, you can use it in the following sentence.

“The following departments need these forms: human resources, finance, sales, and I.T.”

9. Dashes

Use a dash to indicate an emphatic pause.

Ex.: “He knew he had closed the sale—they asked for a contract.”

Use a dash to repeat an idea for emphasis.

Ex.: “The office was cold—ice cold.

Use dashes to set off an explanatory expression that needs emphasis.

Ex.: “The chip—which consumes only 100 MW—quickly converts text into speech.”

10. Apostrophes

Form the possessive of a singular noun or a plural noun not ending in *s* by adding an apostrophe and an *s*. Form the possessive of a plural noun ending in *s* by adding only the apostrophe—for example, “a managers’ meeting,” “the two technicians’ findings.”

Use the apostrophe alone to form the possessive of plurals ending in *es*, as in “the witnesses’ testimony.”

Apostrophes have traditionally been used to form the plural of letters, and numbers (“mind your p’s and q’s”), but the more recent approach is to drop apostrophes whenever the meaning will not be affected—for example, “1990s” or “CD-ROMs.” Always add both an apostrophe and an *s* to form the singular possessive, however (“the BZA’s building fund”).

