

Common Writing Errors and Ways to Avoid Them

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Many students think that grammar and punctuation are trivial details of writing. Wrong. Many times throughout your life, your written word will precede all other information about you. If your written thoughts are marred by incorrect spelling and grammatical errors, you will convey the message that you are not as educated or careful as you should be. Your writing will also fail in its main purpose: to convey a message clearly.

Below are listed some of the most common writing errors in students' papers. Grades on your writing assignments will be lower if your paper includes such errors. Thus, it is quite important that you proof read your paper CAREFULLY and eliminate these errors. If you are not sure about any of these rules, there are at least three things you should do: (a) consult an English grammar book and the *Publication Manual* of the American Psychological Association (available in your library and bookstore), (b) ask your professor to help you, (c) visit the Writing Center on campus for free help. A person educated in any discipline must be able to write and convey ideas clearly. We want to help you learn how.

1. Eliminate unnecessary words. Use maximally precise words. Consider these two sentences from a student's paper:

WRONG: "There has been some initial research on joint custody done, but it has not been done with valid measures and certain scientific standards. The research has been inadequate in determining factors which indicate what aspects of the post-divorce familial relationship have made joint custody successful or unsuccessful."

CORRECT: "Studies of joint custody have generally not included valid measures or rigorous analyses, thus they have made little progress toward identifying the factors that distinguish successful from unsuccessful joint custody arrangements."

2. Have a thesis (an argument or position) and develop it logically. Don't spend pages reviewing literature before you tell the reader what your thesis is. It's a good idea to begin with an overview paragraph that introduces your thesis and lays out the logic of your paper--like a roadmap for the reader.

3. Use complete sentences--not fragments. A complete sentence contains a subject and a verb that goes with the subject. Example of a sentence fragment:

"For example, trained rats who run around mazes all day." ---> "rats" = subject; "who run around mazes all day" = modifier of rats; thus, there's no verb for the subject of the sentence!

4. Keep your sentences concise and brief. Never run two sentences together. This is an example of a run-on sentence: **WRONG:** "In the second chapter of his criticism of Freudian theory, Fink notes that the concept of the Oedipus complex is "silly," this is silly in itself because Fink does not justify his claims and one needs to justify one's claims."

5. Don't use "which" when you mean "that." "That" is used most often. It introduces essential clauses:

The animals that performed well in the first experiment were used in the second experiment.

"Which" introduces non-essential clauses, usually set off from the rest of the sentence with commas:

The animals, which performed well in the first experiment, were not proficient in the second experiment.

Don't use "since" when you mean "because," or "while" when you mean "although" or "whereas."

Both "since" and "while" denote only temporal (time) relations:

CORRECT: "It's been three days since you left." "I read while he watched TV."

WRONG: "Since you paid the bill, I'll get the tip." "While you may be skeptical, I have the data to prove it."

6. Don't (do not) use contractions in formal writing.

7. Singular subjects go with singular verbs, plural subjects with plural verbs: birds fly, data are, datum is, phenomena are, phenomenon is. Be especially careful of this in longer sentences in which the subject is quite a distance from the verb.

8. Use punctuation such as semicolons, colons, commas, and dashes properly. For example: If two independent clauses are joined by a conjunction such as "because," "and," or "or," you must use a comma to separate them. If two clauses are not independent (cannot stand on their own because they do not each have a subject and a verb),

do not use a comma even though they are joined by words like "and" or "because." Correct examples:

Bartlett suggested that schemata are cognitive structures used to order knowledge of the world and to interpret new information.

Bartlett was one of the earliest memory researchers, but his theories about schemata are still quite relevant to memory research.

9. Use parallel constructions. This rule is often violated in lists of phrases:

WRONG: "The present study differs from most other investigations in the field in two respects: first, both husband and wife are included in the data collection and second, the use of the distressed but nonviolent control group to assess whether characteristics of the abusive couples are a function of wife abuse rather than marital discord."

10. Commas and periods ALWAYS go inside quotations marks; question marks, exclamation points, colons, and semicolons go outside.

11. Don't use the sexist general "he" to mean a person of either gender. There are several ways around this trap: use plurals (they, their); use "he and she" or "his and her"; use nouns rather than pronouns (the subjects, the subject's); use "one" or "one's." Do not, however, use a plural pronoun to refer back to a singular noun (e.g., **WRONG:** "One wouldn't want to turn in their psychology paper unless they had proof read it first."). Finally, "he/she" is awkward and attention-grabbing, hence best avoided.

12. Try to avoid using inanimate subjects with verbs that imply an animate subject. Don't say: "This study will examine..." Only people can "examine." Instead, say: "This study was designed to examine..." These constructions imply correctly that human beings were behind the study. When overused, the shorter construction gives the reader an eerie feeling that studies, methods, questionnaires, etc. are running around doing things on their own!

13. Don't use "hopefully" when you mean "I hope," "We hope," "It is desirable," etc.

14. Don't split infinitives (to know, to go, to kiss, etc.) unless it seems stylistically necessary. Technically, an infinitive is a single grammatical unit, so it can't be split. Lately, it's become acceptable to split them in English, but it is still regarded as gauche by tasteful readers. Here are some examples of split infinitives that are considered awkward: "to really know," "to quickly go," "to clumsily draw..."

15. Be sure that subordinate clauses modify the correct noun. Can you see what is wrong with the following awkward examples?

As he walked in, the bird landed on the boy's shoulder.

After telling the story to the subject, the test was completed.

(Hint: Birds don't walk in, tests don't tell stories.)

16. Keep subjects and verbs close together. Here's an example of failure to do this:

WRONG: Finally, the valence or desirability of the self-attribute in relation to its centrality is investigated.

CORRECT: Finally, I will investigate the relationship between the valence or desirability of self-attributes and their centrality to the self."

17. It's "et al." NOT "et. al." "Et" is the Latin word for "and"; it is not an abbreviation. "Al." is the abbreviation for "alii," which is Latin for "others." When you say "Jones et al.," there is no comma after Jones because the phrase means "Jones and others." Just as you wouldn't put commas in that phrase, you wouldn't put one after Jones in "Jones et al."

18. Abbreviations such as e.g. and i.e. are only used inside parentheses. Otherwise, they are spelled out. "e.g." is the abbreviation for the Latin "exempli gratia," or "for example." It should not be followed with "etc." Write "e.g., blood, guts, and glory," not "e.g., blood, guts, etc."

19. "i.e." is the abbreviation of the Latin id est, or "that is." Don't use it to mean "for example."

20. Don't say "difference in a and b" when you mean "difference between a and b." Consider this, from a student's paper:

"Is there any difference in memory for the situation as compared to ability to identify the perpetrator?"

This is a double error--"difference in" should be replaced by "difference between," and "as compared to" should be replaced by "and." Also, don't say "both a as well as b." You may say "both a and b," or "a as well as b," but not a mixture of the two.

21. REFERENCES & CITATIONS: The only way you can be assured of properly referencing sources in your text and in the reference list at the end of a paper is to consult the *Publication Manual*. This can be found in the reference section of your library, and in your bookstore (about \$20.00--you should buy one if you are planning a career in psychology). Here are only two examples of reference formats:

BOOKS:

Finkelhor, D. (1984). *Child sexual abuse*. New York: Free Press.

JOURNALS:

Royse, D., & Birge, B. (1987). Homophobia and attitudes towards AIDS patients among medical, nursing, and paramedical students. *Psychological Reports*, 61, 867-870.

Make sure that your references are EXACTLY correct--there is NO room for error in terms of underlining, punctuation, etc. Other things to note: Don't mention authors' first names in your text or reference list unless a huge part of your paper is about a particular person and her or his work. (To distinguish two authors with the same last name, use first initials.) Be sure that every reference you cite in your paper appears in the final reference list, and vice versa. The purpose of the reference list is to tell the reader about the specific sources you used in your paper, not about everything you've read on the topic. When citing a reference in parentheses in your text, use "&" instead of "and": (Jones & Davis, 1965). Outside parentheses, use "and": "Jones and Davis (1965) found support in their work for..." Finally, students often ask about this situation: You read an article by Jones and Davis (1965). In that article, Jones and Davis cite work by Smith (1960). You would like to talk about the work of Smith in your class paper, but you can't get the Smith (1960) article. You should never cite an article or other work without first reading it yourself. For the purposes of this class assignment, however, you may reference the Smith article in a way such as this: Emotions are heightened when animals are exposed to danger (Smith, 1960, cited in Jones & Davis, 1965). Remember, this indicates that you summarized the statement about emotions, not that the statement was copied directly from the article.

22. HEINOUS ERRORS: Do not ever, under any circumstances, make either of these errors: **WRONG:**

Its a great day because the cat got it's tail free from the lawnmower.

Your going to the store today, aren't you?

CORRECT:

It's a great day because the cat got its tail free...

You're going...

"Its" is the possessive form of it; "it's" is the contraction of it + is.

"Your" is the possessive of you; "you're" is the contraction of you + are or you + were.

23. Plural forms of words **DO NOT CONTAIN APOSTROPHES**. Contractions and possessive forms **DO**. For plural possessives, the apostrophe must go after the plural "s." Examples:

CORRECT: The three cats went to sleep. The cat's in the pantry. The cat's ball of string rolled under the table. The three cats' ball bounced down the stairs. Jurors' decisions are sometimes quite difficult to understand. The individual juror's comments were unbelievable.

24. Capitalize the first word after a colon **if and only if** what follows the colon is a complete sentence in its own right: Examples:

CORRECT: I was amazed when the professor gave me the good news: My paper did not contain a single error.

I need to buy three things at the grocery store: bread, milk, and eggs.

25. Don't misspell words.

26. Use reasonable margins (1 inch), spacing (double spacing), and fonts (e.g., 10 point for type face such as COURIER, 12 point for proportionally spaced CGTIMES). If you think it looks conspicuous, it does. You aren't going to fool anyone with big margins, etc. (Your margins and font should be bigger than the ones on this handout--this is .5 inch margin, 11.5 point CGTIMES.)

27. Don't use cliches or slang in scientific writing. Avoid overused phrases that are essentially meaningless: "At that point in time," "In today's society," etc.

28. Use the active rather than the passive voice when possible.

Active: "Freud realized the importance of the unconscious."

Passive: "The importance of the unconscious was realized by Freud."

29. Plagiarism: Bottom line: Never accept credit for an idea or words that are not your own. This rule may sound simple, but it is frequently abused by inexperienced writers, intentionally or not. Check with the *APA Publication Manual* to find out in detail how to reference the ideas and words of others (it may be a different system than what you're used to--no footnotes). In general, the papers you write should be your own thoughts, thoughts driven only by the research you read, not simple regurgitations of material you have read. If you want to discuss someone else's ideas you must reference them properly as shown:

Jones (1986) states that tomatoes are "stupid and silly" (p. 121).

OR

Jones (1986) suggests that tomatoes are not to be taken seriously. (Note: no words were directly quoted, so no page number was necessary here, but the reference to Jones and the year still was important.)

IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO DO THE FOLLOWING:

Pretend this is a paragraph from Jones (1986):

Tomatoes are stupid and silly. There is no reason why we should eat them, wear them on our heads, or give them as gifts. I move that we bar them from our grocery stores and instead, concentrate our culinary efforts on kumquats. In fact, in 1887, there was a movement to rid the world of tomatoes, but it was undermined by a communist plot.

In Judy's paper she writes:

WRONG: In this paper I will talk about tomatoes. Jones (1986) has talked about tomatoes also. He moves that we bar them from our grocery stores. In fact, in 1887, there was an attempt to get rid of tomatoes, but the attempt was undermined by a communist plot. **This is plagiarism.** It doesn't matter that she mentioned the correct author or that she changed a couple words to make the sentence written by Jones slightly different from her own.

CORRECT: In this paper I will talk about tomatoes. There are varying opinions on the issue of the usefulness of tomatoes. For example, Jones (1986) has expressed a negative attitude toward the use of the tomato in our culture. There have even been organized efforts to ban the tomato from existence (Jones, 1986). On the other hand, most people, like myself, have a certain fondness for tomatoes and think it is irrational to have this discussion. For example, ...

30. In general, **DO NOT QUOTE ENTIRE SENTENCES**. You should not need to use more than one or two direct quotes, if any, in your paper. It is best to use no direct quotes.