THE WRITING CENTER
6171 HELEN C. WHITE HALL
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
608.263.1992
WRITING.WISC.EDU/

TWELVE COMMON ERRORS: A STUDENT SELF-EDITING GUIDE

The following list contains only brief examples and explanations intended for you to use as reminders while you are editing your papers. To learn more:

- Take a free grammar or punctuation review workshop offered by the Writing Center.
- Set up an appointment for an individual conference in the Writing Center.
- Confer with your course instructor.
- Look at the grammar and punctuation materials on the Writing Center's Web site.
- Consult a handbook for additional examples and compete explanations.

1. Sentence Fragments. Make sure each word group you have punctuated as a sentence contains a grammatically complete and independent thought that can stand alone as an acceptable sentence.

Incorrect: Tests of the Shroud of Turin have produced some curious findings. For example, t*he pollen of forty-eight plants native to Europe and the Middle East.*
Revised: Tests of the Shroud of Turin have produced some curious findings. For example, *the cloth contains the pollen* of forty-eight plants native to Europe and the Middle East.

Incorrect: Scientists report no human deaths due to excessive caffeine consumption. *Although caffeine does cause convulsions and death in certain animals.*
Revised: Scientists report no human deaths due to excessive caffeine consumption, although caffeine does cause convulsions and death in certain animals.

2. Sentence Sprawl. Too many equally weighted phrases and clauses produce tiresome sentences.

Incorrect: The hearing was planned for Monday, December 2, *but* not all of the witnesses could be available, *so* it was rescheduled for the following Friday. [There are no grammatical errors here, but the sprawling sentence does not communicate clearly and concisely.]
Revised: The hearing, which had been planned for Monday, December 2, was rescheduled for the following Friday so that all witnesses would be able to attend.

3. Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers. Place modifiers near the words they describe; be sure the modified words actually appear in the sentence.

Incorrect: *When writing a proposal,* an original task is set for research [*Who* is writing a proposal?]
Revised: When writing a proposal, *a scholar sets* an original task for research.

Incorrect: Many tourists visit Arlington National Cemetery, where veterans and military personnel are buried every day from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m.
Revised: Every day from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., many tourists visit Arlington National Cemetery, where veterans and military personnel are buried.

4. **Faulty Parallelism.** Be sure you use grammatically equal sentence elements to express two or more matching ideas or items in a series.

Incorrect: The candidate's goals include winning the election, a health program, and education.
Revised: The candidate's goals include *winning* the election, *enacting* a national health program, and *improving* the educational system.

Incorrect: Some *critics are* not so much opposed to capital punishment as *postponing* it for so long.
Revised: Some *critics are* not so much opposed to sentencing convicts to capital punishment as they *are* to *postponing* executions for so long.

Jemal Ahmed

5. **Unclear Pronoun Reference.** Pronouns must clearly refer to definite referents [nouns]. Use it, they, that, these, those, and which carefully to prevent confusion.

Incorrect: Einstein was a brilliant mathematician. *This* is how he was able to explain the workings of the universe.
Revised: Einstein, *who* was a brilliant mathematician, *used his quantitative ability* to explain the workings of universe.

Incorrect: Because Senator Martin is less interested in the environment than in economic development, she sometimes neglects *it.*
Revised: Because of her interest in economic development, Senator Martin sometimes neglects *the environment.*

6. **Pronoun Agreement.** Be sure that each pronoun agrees in number (singular or plural) with the noun to which it refers (its antecedent or referent).

Incorrect: When *a candidate* runs for office, *they* must expect to have *their* personal life scrutinized.
Revised: When *candidates* run for office, *they* must expect to have *their* personal lives scrutinized.

Incorrect: According to tenets of the "new urbanism," *everyone* needs to consider the relationship of *their* house to the surrounding community.
Revised: According to tenets of the "new urbanism," *everyone* needs to consider the relationship of *his or her* house to the surrounding community.

7. **Incorrect Pronoun Case.** Determine whether the pronoun is being used as a subject, object, or possessive in the sentence, and select the pronoun form to match.

Incorrect: Castro's communist principles inevitably led to an ideological conflict between *he* and President Kennedy.
Revised: Castro's communist principles inevitably led to an ideological conflict between *him* and President Kennedy.

Incorrect: Because strict constructionists recommend fidelity to the Constitution as written, no one objects more than *them* to judicial reinterpretation.
Revised: Because strict constructionists recommend fidelity to the Constitution as written, no one objects more than *they* [object] to judicial reinterpretation.

8. **Omitted Commas.** Use commas to signal nonrestrictive or nonessential material to prevent confusion, and to indicate relationships among ideas and sentence parts.

Incorrect: When it comes to *eating people* differ in their tastes.
Revised: When it comes to eating, people differ in their tastes.

Incorrect: The Huns who were Mongolian invaded Gaul in 451.
Revised: The Huns, who were Mongolian, invaded Gaul in 451. ["Who were Mongolian" adds information but does not change the core meaning of the sentence because Huns were a Mongolian people; it is therefore *nonrestrictive* or *nonessential* and should be set apart with commas.]

9. **Superfluous Commas.** Unnecessary commas make sentences difficult to read.

Incorrect: Field trips are required, in several courses, such as, botany and geology.
Revised: Field trips are required in several courses, such as botany and geology.

Incorrect: The term "scientific illiteracy," has become almost a cliché in educational circles.
Revised: The term "scientific illiteracy" has become almost a cliché in educational circles.

Jemal Ahmed

10. **Comma Splice.** Do not link two independent clauses with a comma (unless you also use a coordinating conjunction and, or, but, for, nor, so yet). Instead use a period or semicolon, or rewrite the sentence.

    Incorrect: In 1952 Japan's gross national product was one third that of France, by the late 1970s it was larger than the GNPs of France and Britain combined.
    Revised: In 1952 Japan's gross national product was one third that of France. By the late 1970s it was larger than the GNPs of France and Britain combined.

    Incorrect: Diseased coronary arteries are often surgically bypassed, however half of bypass grafts fail within ten years.
    Revised: Diseased coronary arteries are often surgically bypassed; however, half of bypass grafts fail within ten years.

11. **Apostrophe Errors.** Apostrophes indicate possessives and contractions but not plurals. Caution: its, your, their, and whose are *possessives* (but no apostrophes). It's, you're, they're, and who's are contractions.

    Incorrect: In the current conflict *its* uncertain *who's* borders *their* contesting.
    Revised: In the current conflict *it is* [it's] uncertain *whose* borders *they are* [they're] contesting.

    Incorrect: The Aztecs ritual's of renewal increased in frequency over the course of time.
    Revised: The Aztecs' rituals of renewal increased in frequency over the course of time.

12. **Words Easily Confused.** Effect is most often a noun (the effect) and affect is most often a verb. Other pairs commonly confused: lead/led and accept/except. Check a glossary of usage to find the right choice.

    Incorrect: The recession had a negative *affect* on sales.
    Revised: The recession had a negative *effect* on sales. (or) The recession *affected* sales negatively.

    Incorrect: The laboratory instructor *choose* not to offer detailed *advise*.
    Revised: The laboratory instructor *chose* not to offer detailed *advice*.

Jemal Ahmed

Jemal Ahmed