



WRITING CENTER

Library and Academic Resource Center (LARC 229)

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Figure 1 Image of the ARC and Writing Center logos

Common Pitfalls in Writing Among College Students

Although the standards of mechanics and grammar in writing are always shifting, readers often expect there to be a level of correctness, especially in academic writing. When many errors are detected in a piece of writing, the reader may become distracted from the actual content the writer is discussing. If a writer does not have a working knowledge of these conventions of academic and professional writing, the reader may miss the writer's ideas entirely. To avoid these types of mistakes, here is a list of the most common writing errors among college students with examples.



Figure 2 An image of a person at a computer, with the computer blowing up like an airbag in a car

Punctuation Errors

- **Missing comma after an introductory element**

When sentences open with introductory words, phrases, or clauses, the reader usually needs a small pause between the introductory element and the main part of the sentence, signified by a comma.

1. Determined to get the job done we worked all weekend. (incorrect)
2. Determined to get the job done, we worked all weekend. (correct)
1. Luckily the boy managed to escape from the burning building. (incorrect)
2. Luckily, the boy managed to escape from the burning building. (correct)

- **Missing comma in a compound sentence**

A compound sentence is made up of two or more clauses that could each stand alone as a complete sentence, but when joining these two sentences with FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so), a comma is needed to join the two thoughts.

1. The words “I do” may sound simple but they mean a lifetime of commitment. (incorrect)
2. The words “I do” may sound simple, but they mean a lifetime of commitment. (correct)

- **Missing comma(s) with a nonrestrictive element**

A nonrestrictive element is not essential to the meaning of the sentence, which is why these phrases need to be set off by commas. If the phrase is removed from the sentence, then the sentence will be grammatically correct.

1. Marina who was the president of the club was the first to speak. (incorrect)
2. Marina, who was the president of the club, was the first to speak. (correct)

- **Comma Splice**

A comma splice is when a comma separates two clauses that could each stand alone as a complete sentence. In order to fix a comma splice, one may insert a semicolon(;),

add a period, or add a conjunction (one of the FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) after the comma. One could also simply restructure the sentence.

1. I was strongly attracted to her, she had no patience with children. (incorrect)
2. I was strongly attracted to her, **but** she had no patience with children. (correct)
1. He was twelve years old, he was very mature for his age. (incorrect)
2. He was twelve years old; he was very mature for his age. (correct)

- **Missing or misplaced possessive apostrophes**

In order to make a sound possessive, you must add an apostrophe (') and an –s at the end of the word. If the noun is already plural, an apostrophe is all that is needed, but possessive personal pronouns do not need the apostrophe: hers, his, its, ours, yours.

1. Overambitious parents can be harmful to a childs well-being. (incorrect)
2. Overambitious parents can be harmful to a child's well-being. (correct)

- **Unnecessary comma(s) with a restrictive element.**

A restrictive element is a clause or word that is essential to the meaning of the sentence. Oftentimes, people will unnecessarily add a comma in this way because, when reading the sentence aloud, there is a pause at this point.

1. Shakespeare's tragedy, *Othello*, deals with the dangers of jealousy. (incorrect)
2. Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* deals with the dangers of jealousy. (correct)

Grammar Errors



Figure 3 A drawing of a pile of books

- **Vague pronoun reference**

Pronouns are words such as “he,” “she,” or “it” which replace another word (or the “antecedent”) so that the word does not have to be repeated. In order to use a pronoun, the antecedent must be clearly used somewhere else in the sentence so that the reader understands what the writer is referring to.

1. Mary is a very smart girl, but she had a lot of trouble with **it**. (incorrect)
2. Mary is a very smart girl, but she had a lot of trouble with **the exam**. (correct)

- **Word errors due to homonyms.**

Certain words called homonyms sound very similar but actually have different meanings. These words are often confused. Some of these homonyms may include: accept vs. except, conscious vs. consciousness, allusion vs. illusion, etc.

1. The team played **there** best, but that was not good enough. (incorrect)
2. The team played **their** best, but that was not good enough. (correct)

- **Wrong or missing verb endings**

Different tenses of verbs require different endings of these verbs (including, -s, -es, -ed, -d). Staying consistent with a tense can also be difficult, but it is absolutely necessary.

1. The United States **drop** two atomic bombs on Japan in 1945. (incorrect)
2. The United States **dropped** two atomic bombs on Japan in 1945. (correct)

- **Wrong or Missing Prepositions**

Prepositions are used to represent relationships in time and space between nouns or pronouns and other words in the sentence. When the wrong preposition is used to a sentence, the entire meaning of the sentence can be changed.

1. Is that a ruby **in** your finger? (incorrect)
2. Is that a ruby **on** your finger? (correct)
1. President Nixon compared the United States **with** a “pitiful, helpless giant.” (incorrect).
2. President Nixon compared the United States **to** a “pitiful, helpless giant.” (correct).

- **Unnecessary shift in tense**

The tense of a sentence tells the reader when the action is happening. If the writer unnecessarily shifts from one tense to another, he or she may confuse the reader.

1. Joy laughs until she cried during Seinfeld. (incorrect)
2. Joy laughs until she cries during Seinfeld. (correct)

- **Unnecessary shift in pronoun**

An unnecessary shift in pronoun occurs when a writer changes the pronoun (which refers to its antecedent) that was previously used in the sentence for no apparent reason. This can create confusion for the reader.

1. When **one** first sees a painting by Georgia O’Keefe, **you are** impressed by a sense of power and stillness. (incorrect)
2. When **one** first sees a painting by Georgia O’Keefe, **one is** impressed by a sense of power and stillness. (correct)

- **Sentence fragment**

A fragment sentence lacks a subject or verb (or both) and is an incomplete sentence. It also may begin with subordinating words such as, “because,” making the meaning of the sentence dependent on another sentence.

1. We returned to the drugstore. **Where we waited for our parents.** (incorrect).
2. We returned to the drugstore, where we waited for our parents. (correct).
1. The old aluminum boat sitting on its trailer. (incorrect)
2. The old aluminum boat **was** sitting on its trailer. (correct)

- **Wrong tense or verb form**

When the wrong tense or the wrong verb is given, readers may not know when an action is, was, or will be completed. Many of these types of errors are caused by confusion over verbs with irregular forms.

1. Mia Hamm **has broke** many soccer records. (incorrect)
2. Mia Hamm **has broken** many soccer records. (correct)
1. The Greeks **builded** a wooden horse that the Trojans **taked** into the city. (incorrect)
2. The Greeks **built** a wooden horse that the Trojans **took** into the city. (correct)

- **Lack of subject-verb agreement**

All verbs must agree with their subject in number and in person. Oftentimes, all that is required to fix the error is to add an –s at the end of the verb.

1. The two main goals of my life **is** to be generous and to have no regrets. (incorrect)
2. The two main goals of my life **are** to be generous and to have no regrets. (correct)
1. My friend **commute** everyday from New York. (incorrect)
2. My friend **commutes** everyday from New York. (correct)

- **Run-on/Fused sentences (comma splice)**

A run-on or fused sentence occurs when clauses that could each stand alone as complete sentences are joined together with no punctuation or word links. This can be

fixed by simply dividing the long sentence into two with a period, or by joining the sentences together with a semicolon (;) or one of the FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so), which are called coordinating conjunctions. .

1. Klee's paintings seem simple they are very sophisticated. (incorrect)
2. Klee's paintings seem simple, **but** they are very sophisticated. (correct)

- **Misplaced or dangling modifiers**

Make sure that every modifier is as close as possible to the word that it modifies. A misplaced modifier can confuse the reader by misleading him or her to believe a certain modifier is referring to the wrong word, phrase, or clause.

1. They could see the eagles swooping and diving **with binoculars**. (incorrect)
2. **With binoculars**, they could see the eagles swooping and diving. (correct)

- **Its versus It's**

"Its" is the possessive form meaning "belonging to," while "it's" is the contracted form of "it is." Be careful not to confuse the two.

1. The car is lying on **it's** side in the ditch. **Its** a white 2000 Subaru. (incorrect)
2. The car is lying on **its** side in the ditch. **It's** a white 2000 Subaru. (correct)

- **That versus Which**

Use "that" with a restrictive clause (this means the clause is essential to the overall meaning of the sentence) and "which" for a nonrestrictive clause (not essential to the overall meaning of the sentence).

1. The pasta sauce, **that** came from Spain, was a crowd favorite. (incorrect)
2. The pasta sauce, **which** came from Spain, was a crowd favorite. (correct)

- **Effect versus Affect**

Use "affect" to mean "brought about," "caused" or "influenced." It almost always takes the form of a verb. "Effect" means "result" and is generally following the words, "a," "an," "any," "the," "take," "into," and "no." "Effect" almost always takes the form of a noun.

1. He **effected** an emotion in the crowd. (incorrect)
2. He **affected** an emotion in the crowd. (correct)
1. The movie had a serious **affect** on my sister. (incorrect)
2. The movie had a serious **effect** on my sister. (correct)

- **Who versus Whom**

Use “who” when referring to the subject of a clause and “whom” when referring to the object of a clause. In the sentence “Sally loves Nick,” Sally is the subject and Nick is the object.

1. **Who** do you love? I love **he**. (incorrect)
2. **Whom** do you love? I love **him**. (correct)
3. **Whom** is there? **Him** is there. (incorrect)
4. **Who** is there? **He** is there. (correct)

Exercises



Figure 4 Cartoon Construction Worker

For numbers 1-5, fill in the missing punctuation marks.

1. Stevens hair is long and he washes it every Tuesday.
2. Jeff who ran for mayor last year is an excellent public speaker.
3. It is very beautiful today the sun is shining and the birds are singing.
4. The Writing Center located at Los Angeles Valley College is a useful resource.
5. After many trials and tribulations Hollys hard work paid off when she received her degree.

For numbers 6-13, change the necessary words, or rearrange the sentence in order to make it correct.

6. Last month, my grandmother stay with us for one week.
7. It's her car, but she crashed it, she is sad.
8. When she came to the door. I saw her beautiful face.
9. The ladybug run very slowly across the grass.
10. I growed large tomato garden last fall.
11. Their is a big truck in front of the house.
12. The author wrote many books. They died a long time ago.
13. The kittens drinks milk from the mother cat.

For the answers to these exercises, please visit The Writing Center.

This handout is based on the following sources:

Lunsford, Andrea. *The Everyday Writer*. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. 2001. Print.

Straus, Jane. *The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation*. 2006. 17 July 2006. Web.

All of the above texts are available at The Writing Center.

Please visit our website at <http://www.lavc.edu/writingcenter> for additional resources and services.

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