

# A concise manual of grammar, usage and style

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## An abbreviation is a short form of another word.

'Dr'. for 'Doctor', 'Herts'. for 'Hertfordshire', 'vol'. for 'volume'. A pronounceable abbreviation without full stops (e.g. NATO) is called an acronym.

It is better to avoid abbreviations in formal and business writing. However, there are occasions when abbreviations are acceptable:

- for times and dates ('a.m.', 'p.m.', 'B.C.', 'A.D'.)
- for names and places usually abbreviated ('St. Louis')
- for professional references, especially if repeating the full name would be awkward (e.g. 'NICU' instead of 'Newborn Intensive Care Unit')

In a case like the last example, however, always let your reader know what the abbreviation stands for the first time you refer to it:

'The Newborn Intensive Care Unit (NICU) is the most heavily staffed unit in the hospital'.

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 *See Also: Jargon*

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## An adjective describes (modifies) a noun or any noun word group.

Typical adjectives are 'old', 'funny', 'five', and 'lost'. Adjectives and adverbs are the only parts of speech in English that describe.

Don't use adjectives to describe actions (verbs), adverbs, or other adjectives. That is the job of adverbs. In the sentence, 'The machine works perfect', the adjective 'perfect' should be the adverb 'perfectly'. 'Perfectly' describes how the machine works, an action, not the machine itself.

'She sings beautiful'. [Incorrect use of adjective] 'She has a beautiful voice'. [Correct use of adjective]

Use 'good' as an adjective, not an adverb.

'She is in good health'. [The adjective 'good' describes 'health'.]

Use 'well' as an adjective only when you mean 'in good health'.

'She is well'. ['Well' is an adjective describing her health.]

Otherwise, use 'well' only as an adverb.

'She writes well'. ['Well' is an adverb describing how she writes.]

An adjective usually comes before the word it modifies ('amusing person', 'cranky armadillo'). The exception to this occurs when an adjective follows a linking verb: 'He is serious'. Here, the adjective 'serious' describes the subject 'He'.

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 *See Also: Adverb*

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## An adverb describes a verb, an adjective, or another adverb.

Many adverbs end in "-ly" ("rarely," "quickly"), but many do not ("often," "very," "too").

Be careful not to confuse adverbs and adjectives.

'She sings beautiful'. [incorrect] 'She sings beautifully'. [correct]  
'I did good on the test'. [incorrect] 'I did well on the test'. [correct]

An adverb describes (verbs, adjectives, other adverbs) by telling how, how much, when, or where.

'She runs quickly'. [The adverb 'quickly' tells how she runs.]  
'My dog eats too much rubbish'. [The adverb 'too' tells how much rubbish.]  
'She tickled him yesterday'. [The adverb 'yesterday' tells when she tickled him.]  
'We dance there'. [The adverb 'there' tells where we dance.]

Adverbs don't always have a fixed location. The adverb 'suddenly' can describe the verb 'appeared' from any of the following positions:

'Suddenly, the man appeared at the door'.  
'The man suddenly appeared at the door'.  
'The man appeared suddenly at the door'.

However, avoid splitting verb phrases by placing adverbs within them. Instead, place the adverb before the verb phrase:

'He should probably tell her'. [incorrect]  
'He probably should tell her'. [correct]  
'She might also be considered a suspect'. [incorrect]  
'She also might be considered a suspect'. [correct]

Many adverbs end in '-ly' ('slowly', 'bravely', 'fiercely'), but almost as many do not ('here', 'often', 'seldom', 'so', 'very', 'not', 'too').

Don't be fooled by an adjective that ends in 'ly' ('lovely', 'friendly'). The best way to identify an adverb, or any part of speech, is to recognize what it does in a sentence.

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 *See Also: Adjective*

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## An archaic word or expression is one no longer in use.

Words like "whilst" and 'oftimes' and phrases like 'not a whit' were common once but are now outdated.

Avoid archaisms. It is likely that they'll only confuse your reader. As the 'Longman Guide to English Usage' notes, 'Skilled writers may occasionally make good use of archaisms in poetry or in humorous writing, but they are inappropriate in normal prose'.

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 *See Also: Audience*

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## The three articles in English -- 'a', 'an', and 'the' -- appear at the beginning of noun phrases.

'A book', 'an old and tattered book'

Use 'a' before nouns that begin with a consonant sound: 'a brick', 'a mouse', 'a landscape'.

Use 'an' before nouns that begin with a vowel sound: 'an idea', 'an elephant', 'an omelette'. Notice the awkward, hiccupping effect produced by trying to say 'a idea' or 'a elephant'.

Use 'a' before words that begin with 'h' if you can hear the 'h' ('a horse', 'a house', 'a hand'). If the 'h' is silent, use 'an' before the word ('an hour', 'an honour').

'A' and 'an' are called indefinite articles because they refer to general, non-specific people, places, things, etc. ('a car', 'an idea'). 'The' is called the definite article because it refers to a specific person, place, thing, etc. ('the car', 'the idea').

 *See Also: Adjective*

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## Capitalize

Always capitalize the first word of each sentence, the pronoun 'I', any proper noun and the adjective form of proper nouns (such as 'Canadian' and 'Shakespearean').

Don't capitalize a common noun like 'horse' or 'house' unless it begins a sentence. The following list offers more specific help.

### **CAPITALIZE:**

---

#### People's names

Groucho Marx, Cliff Richard, Graham Greene, Batman

---

#### Names of places

Warwick, Lake District, but not 'city centre'

---

#### Names of countries, nationalities, races, and religions

Mexico, British, Mongoloid, Jewish, Buddhist

---

#### Names of languages

French, Russian

---

#### Names of particular buildings and landmarks

Buckingham palace, Nelson's column

---

#### Names of days and months

Saturday, December

---

#### Names of companies and organizations

The Guardian, Reference Software International, Greenpeace

---

#### Titles of works

'Hamlet', 'The Yellow Wallpaper', 'Wuthering Heights', 'It's a Wonderful Life', 'Paradise Lost'

---

### Titles of people

Queen Elizabeth II, Prime Minister, Professor Carroll

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### Acronyms

UNESCO, NATO, FIFA, ASLEF, BASIC

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### Salutation and closing of a letter

Dear Ms Jones, Yours sincerely

## A cliché is an overused expression.

Readers have seen 'tip of the iceberg', 'face the music' and 'Achilles' heel' so often that these phrases have lost their freshness and original power.

In some cases, even the cliché's meaning has become lost through overuse. Many people, for example, confuse 'toe the line' with 'tow the line' though their meanings, as the images suggest, are quite different.

Avoid clichés in your writing. They may tempt you, but the reader has seen them before and their appearance suggests a lack of original thought.

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 *See Also: Jargon*

Colloquial language, which includes slang and informal diction, is fine in speech but inappropriate for most non-fiction writing.

Its appearance suggests you may not be able to express yourself formally. Expressions such as 'up the wall' and 'fuddy-duddy' are obviously slang, but be wary of less obvious examples of informal writing like the following.

'Don't try and convince me I'm wrong'. [Substitute 'try to'.] 'The issue is not all that important'. [Substitute 'not very'.] 'She's not about to change her mind'. [Substitute 'not ready to' or 'won't'.] 'Don't miss out on this opportunity'. [Delete 'out on'.] 'We have less trees than the neighbours'. [Substitute 'fewer'.]
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 *See Also: Questionable Usage*

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## The comma splice and the fused sentence join two complete thoughts incorrectly.

The comma splice attempts to join the two thoughts with only a comma:

'Everyone disagreed with him, he didn't care'.

The fused sentence does the same thing but without any punctuation:

'Everyone disagreed with him he didn't care'.

Both errors can be very confusing to your reader. You can correct comma splices and fused sentences by any of the following methods:

a) Put a full stop between the two thoughts and make two sentences.

'Everyone disagreed with him. He didn't care'.

b) Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, so, for, yet) between the two thoughts.

'Everyone disagreed with him, but he didn't care'.

c) subordinate one of the complete thoughts by placing a subordinator (although, because, since, when, etc.) in front of it.

'Although everyone disagreed with him, he didn't care'.

d) Put a semicolon between the two thoughts.

'Everyone disagreed with him; he didn't care'.

e) Combine the two independent clauses by rewording.

'He was indifferent to their opinions'.

---

 See Also: *Subordination, Clause, Punctuation*

## Some words and phrases are often confused due to similar meaning, sound, or spelling

Such as 'accept/except' and 'advert/avert'.

The words in this category are usually the same part of speech.

Such as 'principal/principle'.

Other words that are similar in meaning or spelling, such as 'its' and 'it's', are distinguishable by parts of speech and are flagged under the 'Homonym' or 'Similar Spelling' categories.

(accept/except): 'We will accept all your proposals except the third one'.

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## Avoid using double comparatives and superlatives, such as 'more better' and 'bestest'.

The terms 'comparative' and 'superlative' describe the intensity levels of adjectives and adverbs. There are three such levels of intensity: the positive (or uncomparing) level, the comparative level and the superlative level. Typical adjectives look like this in their three forms:

Positive: slow, big, difficult, happy Comparative: slower, bigger, more difficult, happier Superlative: slowest, biggest, most difficult, happiest
--

Note that you form the comparative by adding 'er' to the end of an adjective or by placing 'more' before it. You form the superlative by adding 'est' to the end of the adjective or by placing 'most' before it.

The choice of whether to use 'more'/'most' or 'er'/'est' depends mostly on the number of syllables in the word. For adjectives of one or two syllables, use the 'er'/'est' suffixes:

strange/stranger/strangest simple/simpler/simplest.
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For adjectives of three or more syllables, use 'more' and 'most' before the words:

outlandish/more outlandish/most outlandish decisive/more decisive/most decisive.
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Sound also plays a part in such a decision, however. A word like 'restful', even though it has only two syllables, sounds awkward with an 'er'/'est' ending. Always choose the less awkward alternative, but never combine the two forms, as in the following:

'Bill is more slower than Bob'. [incorrect] 'Bill is slower than Bob'. [correct] 'She is the most happiest person I know'. [incorrect] 'She is the happiest person I know'. [correct]
--

For adjectives that end in 'y', always replace the 'y' with an 'i' and add 'er' or 'est':

lazy/lazier/laziest easy/easier/easiest.
---

Always form the comparative and superlative of adverbs by preceding them with 'more' and 'most':

easily/more easily/most easily carelessly/more carelessly/most carelessly.
---

'Less' and 'least' correspond to 'more' and 'most' and form negative comparisons:

'less likely', 'least available'.
-----------------------------------

There are no suffixes (like 'er'/'est') to indicate the negative comparative or superlative.

A few adjectives and adverbs are irregular and do not follow the standard pattern:

some/more/most
many/more/most
good/better/best
bad/worse/worst
badly (adverb)/worse/worst

---

 *See Also: Adjective, Adverb*

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## Conjunctions connect words, phrases and clauses to each other.

There are two major types of conjunctions: coordinating conjunctions and subordinating conjunctions.

Coordinating conjunctions [and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet] always connect the same parts of speech:

'salt and pepper' [noun and noun] 'win or lose' [verb or verb] 'merciless but just' [adjective but adjective].
--

'So' and 'for' can only connect independent clauses to each other, not words or phrases.

Coordinating conjunctions can also operate in pairs with other words. When they do this, they are called 'correlative conjunctions':

'NEITHER blackmail NOR whining could change his mind'. 'BOTH ducks AND geese are waterfowl'.
---

Other correlative conjunctions are 'either/or', 'not only/but' and 'whether/or'.

Some of the most common subordinating conjunctions are 'although', 'because', 'if', 'since', 'unless', 'until' and 'whenever'. Subordinating conjunctions are a type of subordinator and always begin dependent clauses. They ensure that the dependent clause is incomplete. The thought following the subordinating conjunction would be complete if the subordinating conjunction weren't there.

'Although the report was brief'. [dependent clause - incomplete thought] 'The report was brief'. [main clause - complete thought]
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 See Also: *Subordination, Punctuation*

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## Doubled words and punctuation marks are almost always errors.

They are usually caused by typing mistakes, as in the following sentence:

'He went to the the store'.

They can also be caused by incorrectly placing a full stop after an abbreviation like 'etc'.:

'He'd already read Dickens, Balzac, Woolf, etc.'.

In some instances, a doubled word is justified even if slightly awkward:

'I can't believe that that is the reason he resigned'.  
'What it is is shameful'.

However, doubled punctuation marks are always errors.

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 *See Also: Punctuation*

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## Double negatives are two negative words in the same thought.

This is non-standard in business and formal writing.

Any two of the following negative words in the same clause will trigger the double negative error:

no, never, not, none, nothing, hardly, scarcely, barely.

Delete one of the negatives as in the examples below:

'She does not have no money'. [incorrect]  
'She does not have any money'. [correct]  
'She has no money'. [correct]  
'I can't hardly wait'. [incorrect]  
'I can hardly wait'. [correct]

Writers, teachers, and critics once considered ending a sentence with a preposition a serious writing fault, but this is rarely the case nowadays.

Ending with a preposition does, however, lend the sentence an informal tone. Consider rephrasing when using a formal writing style.

The traditional argument is that ending a sentence with a preposition is 'un-Latinate' and clumsy. English, though, is a very different language from Latin, and the attempt to force it to follow Latin standards often produces unnecessary problems.

An end-of-sentence preposition can sometimes make a sentence flat and ugly:

'College is where he's off to'. [Compare 'He's off to college'.]

But a sentence like the following would suffer if one tried to obey the rule and relocate the preposition:

'He asked the stranger where he was from'.

Winston Churchill's remark that this rule 'is nonsense up with which I will not put' wryly illustrates the awkwardness of straining too hard to follow the rule. Many writers think that the best advice is to aim for clarity and grace and let the prepositions fall where they may.

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 *See Also: Preposition*

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## Only three punctuation marks can end a sentence: a question mark, an exclamation point and a full stop.

'There's a moon out tonight?'  
'There's a moon out tonight!'  
'There's a moon out tonight'.

If you end a sentence with a question mark or an exclamation point, never follow it with a full stop. If you end your sentence with a quotation, never punctuate inside and outside the second pair of quotation marks. In other words, don't write:

'All the world's a stage.'.

Full stops belong outside the second quotation mark.

Question marks and exclamation points belong inside the second pair of quotation marks:

a) if they are part of the quotation:

She enjoyed reading 'What Makes Sammy Run?'  
Our theatre company is staging 'Oklahoma!'

b) if they apply to the tone of your sentence:

Who wrote 'What Makes Sammy Run?'  
I just got the lead role in 'Oklahoma!'

Question marks and exclamation points belong outside the second pair of quotation marks if they apply to your sentence but not to what you're quoting:

Who wrote 'East of Eden'?  
Have you read 'Frankenstein'?  
I was so scared when I read 'Frankenstein'!

---

 See Also: *Punctuation, Clause*

## You should omit foreign expressions from your writing unless your topic requires them.

There are two reasons for this. First, foreign words and phrases will probably be lost on your reader. Second, if they're not, their appearance suggests that you are using them merely to impress.

Always make clarity your first consideration. Your reader stands a better chance of understanding 'accomplished fact' than 'fait accompli'. Other examples:

Instead of: 'He paints darkly, la Rembrandt'. Use: 'He paints darkly, in the style of Rembrandt'.

Instead of: 'cause celebre' Use: 'controversy' or 'famous case'

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 *See Also: Jargon, Audience*

---

## While some writers see 'formalisms' as unnecessary, others see them as distinctions that protect the language from erosion.

Whether you choose to observe the following rules or not depends upon your audience and your own preferences.

What follows is a list of some of the most common 'formalisms' and a brief discussion of their importance.

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### Beginning a sentence with a conjunction.

Because conjunctions connect words, phrases, or clauses, some writers feel that a conjunction (like 'and' or 'but') should not begin a sentence since there is nothing yet to connect.

However, the conjunction at the beginning of a sentence still connects: it connects the thought from the previous sentence to the thought that follows the conjunction. Since sentences do not exist in isolated units but are dependent on each other, there is no reason why connections cannot cross sentence boundaries. As with any formalism, the only question worth asking is, 'Do my content and clarity suffer if I break this rule?'

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### 'Between' and 'among'

Use 'between' when referring to two people or items, 'among' when referring to more than two. Because this distinction relates to content, it is one you should observe.

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### Dangling modifiers

A dangling modifier is an error that occurs when the implied subject of one clause clashes with the stated subject of another. For instance, according to the following sentence,

'Standing in front of the old house, the memories came flooding back', the 'memories' were standing in front of the old house.  
According to this sentence, 'Although only fifteen inches long, the nurse declared that the infant was in good health', the nurse was only fifteen inches long.

Though they often make for good comedy, dangling modifiers are real errors because they interfere with your content. Correct them by making sure that the implied subject of the first clause begins the next one. The above sentences would be corrected as follows.

'Standing in front of the old house, I felt the memories come flooding back'.  
'Although only fifteen inches long, the infant was in good health according to the nurse'.

You can also correct such sentences by inserting a stated subject in the first clause or by general rewording.

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### 'Disinterested' and 'uninterested'

'Disinterested' means 'impartial'; 'uninterested' means 'not interested'. These words obviously have very different meanings and should not be used interchangeably.

---

### 'Hopefully'

Many people use 'hopefully' to mean 'I hope', but its correct meaning is 'with hope'. Thus, the sentence,

'Hopefully, Bill will arrive on the next train',

should mean that Bill will arrive, filled with hope, on the next train. Unfortunately, the correct use of 'hopefully' is becoming rarer.

This is an important concern because it has to do with content, not merely style. As readers, we naturally hope that an author knows what he or she is saying. Avoid misusing 'hopefully' except in informal circumstances.

---

### Greek and Latin singulars and plurals

Few people today are aware of words like 'datum', but such distinctions are still recognized in more formal writing styles. A few of the most common examples of Greek and Latin singulars and plurals follow.

criterion - singular, criteria - plural  
datum - singular, data - plural  
medium - singular, media - plural  
phenomenon - singular, phenomena - plural  
stratum - singular, strata - plural

---

### 'Who' and 'whom'

'Who' is always a subject, 'whom' an object. Thus, in the question 'Who do you want it for?' the pronoun 'Who' should be 'whom' because the person in question is receiving, not doing. Many feel comfortable using 'whom' only when it follows a preposition ('To whom it may concern', 'someone for whom I have great affection'), but it's far more reliable to take a moment to understand whether the person represented by the pronoun is acting or receiving action. This distinction should be preserved in formal use.

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 See Also: *Preposition, Conjunction, Relative Pronoun*

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## Gender-specific language unnecessarily assigns male gender in situations when the reference could be to either gender.

While such an assumption was once acceptable, writers today realize that such language is imprecise and serves only to alienate one half of humanity. Be especially careful of gender-specific language in the following areas.

---

### Job terminology

Avoid the temptation to use a male job title to refer to a job done by both men and women. The use of 'policemen' to refer to all police officers would understandably offend the thousands of women who work in police departments. When generalizing, try to use forms that are neutral as to gender.

Instead of: 'firemen' Use: 'fire fighters'

Some gender-specific terms are not generally recognized.

Instead of: 'poetess' Use: 'poet'

---

### Sexist generalizations

When you refer to a group or class of people without using a job title, you should still be careful not to apply an assumed gender to it. Such an assumption would lead one to believe that all farmers are male and all feminists are female. Until recently, it was the rare history book that avoided the trap of referring, for instance, to the 'early American settlers and their wives'. Such phrasing is not only offensive to the women who endured the same hardships as men, it is historically misleading.

---

### Pronoun use and agreement

A pronoun must agree in number and gender with its antecedent. If the antecedent is masculine, the pronoun must also be masculine for the sake of agreement. Things get complicated, however, when the antecedent's gender is not obvious. In a sentence like this

'Each board member is responsible for [pronoun] own case files'.

the writer must decide whether the pronoun should be masculine (his), feminine (her), both (his or her), or plural (their).

Since the antecedent is singular, the possessive pronoun should also be singular, which would disqualify 'their'. 'His or her' is a logical but often awkward choice, especially if you have to repeat 'his or her' throughout an entire document. Using masculine or feminine pronouns generically has rightfully been labelled sexist.

Clearly, no simple solution to this problem exists. However, consider these two alternatives.

1) Make the pronoun and antecedent plural when you can. Thus, the sample sentence above would read,

'All board members are responsible for their own case files'.

2) Rewrite to eliminate the need for pronouns. A sentence like the following

'A psychiatrist and his patients enjoy a unique relationship.'

can be reworded in a way that sidesteps the need for a pronoun (and a sexist generalization) altogether:

'The psychiatrist-patient relationship is unique'.

As Casey Miller and Kate Swift point out, 'Sometimes the puzzle is not how to avoid using 'generic', pronouns, but how and why one ever crept into the sentence to start with'.

---

 *See Also: Pronoun Number Agreement, Pejorative*

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**A homonym is a word that sounds like another word with a different meaning and spelling.**

Some of the most frequently confused homonyms follow.

it's = contraction of 'it is' / its = possessive form of 'it' their = possessive form of 'they' / there = refers to a place / they're = contraction of 'they are' threw = past tense of 'throw' / through = passing in and out of something; finished with / to = preposition [to the store] or infinitive [to laugh] too = means 'also' or 'overly' / two = the number '2' who's = contraction of 'who is', 'who has' / whose = possessive form of 'who'
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If you are unsure about the distinction between other homonyms, consult your dictionary.

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 *See Also: Commonly Confused, Similar Words*

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## All Standard and Formal writing styles require that sentences be complete.

To be complete, a sentence must have

- > a subject (a noun or pronoun)
- > a verb
- > the ability to stand alone coherently.

If it is missing one of these, the result is an incomplete sentence (also called a sentence fragment). Incomplete sentences are grammatically incorrect. More importantly, they can confuse your reader.

You can correct most incomplete sentences by one of the following methods:  
Connect the fragment to the sentence before or after it.

'Bob decided not to study marine biology. Because he'd never been to the seaside'.  
[incorrect]  
'Bob decided not to study marine biology because he'd never been to the seaside'. [correct]

Supply the fragment with its own subject and/or verb.

'He has several favourite pastimes. For example, swimming, reading and walking the dog'.  
[incorrect]  
'He has several favourite pastimes. For example, he enjoys swimming, reading and walking the dog'. [correct]

Combine and reword the fragment and sentence before or after it.

'People who think directing traffic is fun. They have never stood in a busy intersection'. [incorrect]  
'People who think directing traffic is fun have never stood in a busy intersection'. [correct]

---

 See Also: *Comma Splice or Fused Sentence*

---

## Even if they agree with their subjects, verbs can take nonstandard forms which you should avoid.

Perhaps the most common of these is the 'ize' suffix which, when attached to a noun or adjective, creates a verb (for example, 'prioritize'). Avoid such artificial verbs. They are a form of jargon and will therefore exclude part of your audience. Keep in mind, however, that many legitimate verbs, like 'realize' and 'sympathize', end in 'ize'.

Another common incorrect verb form is the confusion of 'of' for 'have' in phrases like 'should of' and 'could of'. The correct form is 'should have' and 'could have'. This confusion is due to the similar sound of 'have' and 'of'. Other examples of incorrect verb form follow.

Instead of: 'finalize' Use: 'complete', 'finish'
Instead of: 'if that was' Use: 'if that were' (subjunctive mood)
Instead of: 'reoccur' Use: 'recur'
Instead of: 'suppose to' Use: 'supposed to'

---

 *See Also: Questionable Usage*

---

The infinitive, also called infinitive phrase, is 'to' plus the base form of a verb ('to run', 'to be').

Use only the base form of the verb after 'to' ('to laugh', not 'to laughs').

When an infinitive is the subject of your sentence, always match it with a singular verb:

'To err IS human'.  
'To leave now SEEMS rude'.

Be careful not to confuse an infinitive with a present participle, as in the following examples.

'I hope visiting my Aunt Gert this summer'. [Replace 'visiting' with the infinitive 'to visit'.]  
'He enjoys to talk to people'. [Replace 'to talk' with 'talking'.]

Certain verbs, like 'decide' and 'expect', invite infinitives to follow them:

'He decided to ask for a rise'.  
'I expect to graduate in June'.  
'I want to see the Peak District'.

Remember also that 'to' can be a preposition. If it is followed by a noun or pronoun, 'to' is a preposition. If it is followed by the base form of a verb, 'to' is beginning the infinitive phrase:

'to propose' [infinitive]  
'to the moon' [prepositional phrase]  
'to see' [infinitive]  
'to him' [prepositional phrase]

---

 See Also: *Split Infinitive*

## Avoid jargon unless you're writing for the specific audience that understands it.

Use words that your readers will immediately understand. Jargon is the specialized vocabulary of a group or profession. As such, it can be a compact and efficient means of communication. An electrical engineer saves time and avoids confusion by referring to LEDs (light-emitting diodes) instead of 'those funny blinking lights'. Terms such as 'interface' in computer technology, 'complex' in psychology and 'party' in law are other examples of jargon.

However, jargon may also be a way to keep those outside the group confused and intimidated and the word itself usually has a negative connotation. (Some writers make a distinction between 'technical language', which aids communication and 'jargon', which obscures it.)

Jargon's 'bad reputation' has another source. Terms that are legitimate within a given field become distorted by misuse of them outside that field. A word like 'interface', which has a specific meaning in the computer field, becomes trivialized by people's vague use of it as a verb: 'I will try to interface with you next week over a power lunch'. This is not language for the purpose of communication; this is mere silliness.

Avoid jargon unless you are writing for the members of a specific profession or field.

---

 *See Also: Audience, Overstated, Abbreviation*

## Long sentences can make your reader's job unnecessarily difficult.

While not every sentence needs to be, or should be, four or five words long, sentences such as this one that make your reader wait too long for such vital information as the main clause or the verb to a subject that appeared some thirty words before are tedious and confusing. In a sentence like the last, the reader notices the sentence's length, not its content.

Avoid excessively long sentences. If you do write one, perhaps for sentence variety, take pity on your reader. Give the most important information first and keep your subjects and verbs fairly close together.

---

 *See Also: Sentence Variety*

'Mid-sentence' or 'media' adverbs are those, like 'usually' and 'seldom', that generally come in the middle of a clause.

In a verb phrase containing more than one verb, a mid-sentence adverb should come before the second verb.

'He has never been arrested' is preferable to 'He never has been arrested'.

When a form of 'to be' is the only verb, the mid-sentence adverb should come after it.

'Ann is often late' is preferable to 'Ann often is late'.

Placing the adverb in this medial position is a matter of style, not grammar. The above examples show the commonly preferred word order in most formal writing.

---

## A noun phrase consists of a noun and its modifiers acting as a subject, object, or complement.

Most noun phrase errors are due to missing words, number disagreement, and scrambled word order. The following list highlights the major error types.

---

### Missing modifier before a noun.

'He let out dog'.

---

### Missing modifier in a compound noun phrase with nouns of differing number.

'Our cricket team consists of ten boys and girl'.

---

### Number discrepancy.

'A family with five boy moved in next door'.

---

### Scrambled word order.

'His time for the race sets a new record track'.

---

 See Also: *Article, Adjective*

## Avoid mixing spelled-out numbers and figures in the same sentence or paragraph.

Use figures if one or more numbers falls outside the range required by your writing style.

'He ordered 450 sandwiches, 56 portions of potato salad and 3 ducks'.

The following are other rules governing the use of numbers.

-Spell out any number that begins a sentence or clause.

'Thirteen people joined the dance troupe'.

-Use figures when you refer to dates, times, addresses, measurements, fractions, identification numbers, chapters and pages.

'We read Chapter 21, pp. 303-351, on August 19'.

-Use a hyphen between spelled-out two-word numbers.

'twenty-three', 'forty-six', 'ninety-nine'

Unless the numbers involved are statistics, spell out round numbers ('thirty thousand' instead of '30,000', 'five hundred' instead of '500') unless doing so conflicts with another number rule.

---

An object is a noun or pronoun that follows a transitive verb. Be careful not to give an intransitive verb like 'arrive' or 'cough' an object.

A direct object receives the action of an action verb. An indirect object tells to whom or for whom an action was done. To identify a direct object, ask 'whom?' or 'what?' after the verb. Your answer, if the verb is transitive, will be the direct object.

'I called Louise'. ['Louise' = direct object.] 'He needs attention'. ['attention' = direct object] 'Sarah asked a question'. ['question' = direct object]
---

If we change the last sentence to read, 'Sarah asked Jim a question', 'Jim' is the indirect object because the action was done 'for' him. The question 'for whom?' or 'to whom?' will produce the indirect object just as a 'whom?' or 'what?' question will produce the direct object.

'She bought her dog diamonds'. [Bought what? diamonds (direct object)] [Bought diamonds for whom? dog (indirect object)]
--

---

 See Also: *Subject-Verb Agreement*

## Overstated language is wordy, vague and often pretentious.

Some writers mistakenly believe that inflated diction gives their writing an air of authority and sophistication. But the best writing is the clearest and clarity comes from simplicity. Consider the silliness of a sentence like this:

'The council's postulation that canines of an unrestrained nature have bedecked the community with malodorous substances has been the *raison d'être* of the recent legal imposition: namely, that said canines be severely limited as to their freedom and that such limitation manifest itself in the physical form of a wire run or leash'.

Translated, this sentence merely means, 'The council recently passed a law requiring dogs to be restrained '. There is no reason to subject your reader to such an assault.

Overstated language makes your reader's job difficult and undermines your credibility. Take the following steps to keep your writing clear:

- Avoid lofty, pretentious diction
- Avoid using foreign expressions unnecessarily
- Choose the active voice whenever possible
- Always choose a word over a phrase (e.g. 'law', not 'legal imposition')
- Replace abstractions with concrete language

---

 See Also: *Wordy, Jargon, Audience, Foreign*

## The most common paragraph problem is the one-sentence paragraph.

This is not an error in journalism, advertising and fiction. In most writing styles, however, excessively short (or excessively long) paragraphs indicate a lack of focus.

Paragraphs and sentences communicate ideas, but they do so on different levels. The paragraph conveys a general thought which each of the sentences within it should support. In a paper arguing against capital punishment, each paragraph would present one reason why capital punishment should be abolished. The sentences within each paragraph would support that one reason. A one-sentence paragraph blurs this distinction between sentences and paragraphs and inadequately develops its point.

A one or two-sentence paragraph in most writing styles almost certainly belongs to the paragraph before or after it. Similarly, an excessively long paragraph is probably overlapping ideas. Always ask yourself, 'What is the specific purpose of this paragraph?' If you cannot provide a clear answer, you may need to combine paragraphs or break up lengthy ones.

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 *See Also: Long Sentence*

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## Passive voice is the form of a verb that stresses the action over the subject.

'The ball was thrown by Charles'.

In the passive voice, the subject is acted upon rather than acting. The passive voice is unnecessary in most cases and can weaken your content.

The passive voice emphasizes the action of a sentence and makes the subject secondary. In the passive voice, the actual subject, the 'doer' of the action, is either missing from the sentence:

'The ball was thrown'.  
'The report was presented'.

- or appears in a prepositional phrase at the end of the sentence:

'The ball was thrown by Joe'.  
'The report was presented by the department'.

You should avoid the passive voice for most writing styles. It is wordier than the active voice (because it requires a verb phrase), vaguer and, at its worst, deliberately deceptive. However, some fields, notably the sciences, require the passive voice for the impersonal description of a process. Choose the voice most appropriate for your audience.

 *See Also: Audience, Wordy*

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## Pejorative language is the use of insulting terms to refer to a race, sex, nationality, religion, etc.

Words such as 'frump' and 'Jewess' are always offensive and have no place in nonfiction writing.

Pejorative language also calls attention to one's race or sex unnecessarily. Sometimes, of course, it is necessary to refer to the race or sex of a person: 'Bessie Smith, the black blues singer, bled to death because a whites-only hospital refused to admit her'.

But there is no good reason to mention that a 'black man' robbed an off-licence or that a 'woman scientist' discovered a cure for a certain disease. In both instances, the assumptions are prejudiced: that a 'man' is white and a 'scientist' male unless otherwise specified.

Avoid unnecessary references to race, sex, nationality, religion, etc.

---

 *See Also: Gender-Specific*

---

## The possessive form indicates ownership.

There are two kinds of possessives: possessive nouns (e.g. 'Bill's') and possessive adjectives (also called 'possessive pronouns').

Possessive adjectives consist of the following:

my/mine, your/yours, his, her/hers, its, our/ours, their/theirs, whose.
---

Possessive adjectives need no apostrophe because the words themselves are possessive. Possessive nouns are merely nouns made possessive by adding an apostrophe (and, usually, an 's'). This is also true of nonpossessive pronouns like 'someone'.

Singular nouns take an apostrophe s ['s]. Plural nouns not ending in 's' take an apostrophe s ['s] also. Plural nouns ending in 's' take an apostrophe [s'] only.

Exceptions to the rule concerning singular nouns include certain names (Burns', Dickens', Jesus', Jones', Keats', Moses') and Greek names of more than one syllable ending in 's' (Aristophanes', Euripides', Socrates', Xerxes').

Bob's car, Chris's pancreas, the Smiths' house, the Wilson's house, nobody's business.

To indicate joint ownership in a pair or list, make only the last name possessive. For example, 'Dick and Jane's paintings' means that Dick and Jane own paintings together; 'Dick's and Jane's paintings' refers to separate ownership of paintings.

To see if you've formed the possessive correctly, turn the word receiving the possession and the word doing the possessing into a phrase like the following:

Chris', pancreas = the pancreas of Chris the people's choice = the choice of the people someone's idea = the idea of someone
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 *See Also: Punctuation*

## A preposition is a word that shows the relationship between a noun or pronoun and other words in a sentence.

Prepositions include such words as 'with', 'from', 'to', 'at', 'of', and 'by' and take nouns or pronouns as their objects.

Preposition errors are caused by mismatching certain prepositions with other words or phrases.

Besides their use in prepositional phrases, prepositions can also accompany other words. The correct choice of

preposition is largely idiomatic.

For example, since it is correct to say 'according to', it might seem that it should also be correct to say 'in accordance to'. However, the correct preposition after 'in accordance' is 'with'. In such a case, the only way to know the correct preposition is through repeated use. Other examples follow.

Instead of: 'authority about' Use: 'authority on'
Instead of: 'comply to' Use: 'comply with'
Instead of: 'desirous to' Use: 'desirous of'
Instead of: 'prefer A over B' Use: 'prefer A to B'

---

 See Also: *Questionable Usage, Incorrect Verb Form*

## Pronoun case errors can confuse your reader and distort your meaning.

There are three cases in English: subjective, objective, and possessive. Pronouns in the subjective case act as subjects. Pronouns in the objective case act as direct objects, indirect objects, and objects of prepositions. Pronouns in the possessive case indicate ownership and usually act as adjectives. The following will help to identify the case of pronouns.

Subject pronouns: I, he, she, we, they  
Object pronouns: me, him, her, us, them  
Possessive pronouns: my, mine, your, yours, his, her, hers, its, our, ours, their, theirs

The sentence, 'He handed the report to Jim and I', has a pronoun case error because 'I' is a subject pronoun trying to be the object of the preposition 'to'. The correct pronoun is 'me'. In such a sentence, where there is more than one subject or object, block out the other subjects or objects. This will make the case of the pronoun in question clearer.

'Wilson expects Jean and I to reorganize the committee'. [Omit 'Jean and'.]

The sentence, 'Wilson expects I to reorganize the committee', is ungrammatical. The pronoun 'I', always a subject pronoun, is unable to act as the direct object of the verb, 'expect'. The sentence should read, 'Wilson expects Jean and me to reorganize the committee'. What follows is a list of rules for correct pronoun case usage and examples.

Use 'who' and 'whoever' as subject pronouns. Use 'whom' and 'whomever' as object pronouns.

'My rich uncle says he'll give his money to whomever he wants'.  
'Here's the man who saved my life'.

Use subject pronouns after linking verbs.

'The ones responsible are she and I'.  
'I'm calling for Mr. Duffy'.  
'This is he'.

Use subject pronouns after 'than' or 'as' when an implied verb could follow the pronoun.

'He is more desperate than I (am)'.  
'She likes squid more than I (do)'.

Be careful, however, not to convey an unintended meaning by confusing subject and object pronouns. Contrast the above sentence with the following:

'She likes squid more than me'.

This last sentence means that 'She' likes squid more than she likes me. When in doubt which pronoun to use, see if you can insert an implied verb after the pronoun in question.

 *See Also: Object of Verb, Pronoun Number Agreement, Subject-Verb Agreement*

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## Pronouns must agree in number with the nouns or pronouns they refer to (called 'antecedents').

A singular pronoun must reflect a singular antecedent; a plural pronoun must reflect a plural antecedent. When the numbers of the antecedent and pronoun do not agree, the result is a pronoun (or number) error, as in the following:

'In this tropical paradise, a PERSON can really lose THEMSELVES'.

The simplest way to fix such an error is to make the pronoun and antecedent plural. This solution sidesteps the problem of using masculine (or feminine) pronouns generically. Another solution is to use 'he or she', or, for the above sentence, 'himself or herself'. This has the disadvantage of being awkward, especially upon repeated use. A third solution is simply to reword the sentence in such a way as to avoid the need for a pronoun:

'In this tropical paradise, cares and responsibilities disappear'.

The following rules offer help for different types of problems.

Use a plural pronoun for antecedents joined by 'and'.

'Laurel and Hardy made THEIR best films for Hal Roach Studios'.

Use a singular pronoun for antecedents joined by 'or'.

'Either Ralph or Sam left HIS shoes in the sink'.

When pronouns joined by 'or' or 'nor' differ in number or gender, make the pronoun agree with the closest antecedent:

'Neither the twins nor SHEILA has HER passport'.  
'Neither Sheila nor the TWINS have THEIR passports'.

Use a singular pronoun for most indefinite pronoun antecedents.

'Everyone needs to pay for HIS OR HER ticket'.  
'Someone is taking more than HIS OR HER share'.

Indefinite pronouns are words like 'someone', 'anyone', 'everybody' and 'nobody'. Most indefinite pronouns are singular, but some, like 'none', 'some', 'any' and 'all', can be singular or plural, depending on context:

'Some set their goals impossibly high'.  
'Some of the difficulty has its origins in misunderstanding'.

Use a singular pronoun when 'each' and 'every' precede singular nouns joined by 'and'.

'Every language and culture has ITS own richness'.  
'Each child and adult should do HIS OR HER best'.

---

## Punctuation lets your reader know how to read what you have written.

Punctuation marks are somewhat like traffic signals: both give order to what would otherwise be chaos. What follows is a list of the major punctuation marks and their functions.

---

### Apostrophe

Apostrophes have two purposes:

- 1) For use in contractions, to represent a missing letter or letters. For instance, the apostrophe in 'I'm' represents the missing 'a' ('I am'); the apostrophe in 'doesn't' represents the missing 'o' in 'does not'.
- 2) To show possession. To make a noun (or non possessive pronoun) that does not end in 's' possessive, add apostrophe and 's' ['s]. If the word does end in 's', simply add an apostrophe after it.

---

### Colon

The colon has one purpose: to separate the general from the specific. (The preceding sentence is itself a good model for colon use.)

In the above sentence, the general information is 'one purpose'. To learn what that one purpose is, we need to look to the right of the colon. The colon, in essence, 'promises' to specify the general information that comes before it. You should always be able to pick out the word or phrase that represents the general information:

'There is only one reason [General] he feeds the homeless: money'. [Specific] 'Two subjects [General] plagued her throughout college: maths and gym'. [Specific].
--

Note: The 'General' part must be a complete thought; the 'Specific' part may be but does not need to be. Never put a colon where you couldn't put a full stop, as in the following example:

'My favourite colours are: red, yellow and black'. [incorrect]
--

---

### Comma

Use a comma according to the following four rules:

- 1) After an introductory word, phrase, or clause
- 2) To separate items in a series [a,b,c and d].  
(Note: do not omit the comma before the 'and' which closes the series. Although some writers disagree on this point, this comma tells the reader that 'c' and 'd' are separate items, not halves of one item. This is especially helpful when the items in a list consist of more than one word, e.g. Laurel and Hardy.)
- 3) Before a coordinating conjunction but only when the conjunction connects two complete thoughts
- 4) Before and after nonessential words, phrases and clauses. (If the nonessential element begins the sentence, consider it introductory (rule #1); if the nonessential ends the sentence, the full stop replaces the second comma.)

## Semicolon

The semicolon has two purposes:

- 1) To separate two complete thoughts (equivalent to comma plus conjunction; see comma rule no. 3)
- 2) To separate items in a series when there is any question where one item ends and another begins.

---

 *See Also: Conjunction, Comma Splice or Fused Sentence, Possessive Form*

---

Words and phrases of questionable usage may be either incorrect or less preferred than a more standard alternative.

The following are common examples of such errors. When in doubt, consult your dictionary.

Instead of: different than Use: different from
Instead of: inferior than Use: inferior to
Instead of: irregardless Use: regardless
Instead of: one's self Use: oneself
Instead of: orientate Use: orient
Instead of: preventative Use: preventive

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 *See Also: Incorrect Verb Form*

---

## Use a question mark after any direct question.

'What will you be wearing tonight?'  
'He asked, 'When is the report due?''

Do not use a question mark after indirect questions.

'He asked if there were any dip left'.  
'They wondered whether or not to adopt the new plan'.

Remember that a direct question asks a question and an indirect question tells that a question was asked. Remember too not to place a full stop or comma before or after a question mark.

If you're quoting a question, the question mark belongs inside the second pair of quotation marks:

He asked, 'Have you seen my armadillo?'

Place the question mark outside the second pair of quotation marks if the question is yours and not part of the quote:

Who was it who said, 'Give me liberty, or give me death'?

If you're asking a question and you're also quoting a question, place the question mark inside the second pair of quotation marks. Never double punctuate by placing one question mark inside the second pair of quotation marks and one outside.

---

 *See Also: Punctuation*

## A redundant phrase says the same thing twice.

'Frozen ice', for example, is redundant because there is no other type of ice. Similarly, 'illegal crime' and 'free gift' should be revised simply as 'crime' and 'gift'.

Avoid redundancies. They clutter your writing and undermine your credibility as a writer. Correct redundancies by deleting the unnecessary word in the phrase.

<i>Instead of</i>	/	<i>Use</i>
'add on'	/	'add'
'join together'	/	'join'
'past history'	/	'past'
'recur again'	/	'recur'
'red in colour'	/	'red'

---

 *See Also: Wordy*

---

## Many people use the relative pronouns 'that' and 'which' incorrectly to begin clauses.

1) Use 'which' to begin clauses that are not essential to the meaning of a sentence. 'That' is always incorrect in the following construction:

'Her new red car, that she bought last week, is already rusting'. [incorrect]

2) Use 'that' to begin clauses that are essential to the meaning of the sentence. These clauses aren't set off from the rest of the sentence by commas.

3) Use 'who' to refer to people in either type of clause.

Always set off non-restrictive (nonessential) clauses with commas. Do not set off restrictive (essential) clauses with commas.

'Bill's new movie, which is being released this summer, is about the McCarthy era'. [non-restrictive, requires commas]

'The issue that began the Civil War was the debate over slavery'. [restrictive, no commas]

'The man who rescued a basset hound from a burning building is receiving a medal for heroism'. [restrictive, no commas]

'Sid's girlfriend, who tried to kill him last year, has agreed to marry him'. [non-restrictive, requires commas]

---

 See Also: *Formalisms, Relative Clause, Subordination, Punctuation*

## A run-on sentence is simply one that runs on too long.

This error is usually due to using conjunctions to connect an excessive number of clauses in a single sentence, as in the following example.

'He loved the princess and wanted to marry her, BUT he feared their differences would drive a wedge between them, SO he kept his feelings to himself EVEN THOUGH they threatened to overpower him and interfere with his work, YET he could think of no other solution, FOR he knew their love could never be'.

Break up such sentences by replacing some of the conjunctions with a full stop and beginning a new sentence.

---

 *See Also: Long Sentence, Wordy, Conjunction*

---

## The second person ['you'] is considered informal.

It seems to presume an intimacy towards the reader which is inappropriate in formal writing; it is also too easily repeated, and overuse can threaten to bury the reader under an avalanche of 'you's'. If you are writing in a style such as 'Memo', 'you', of course, is not only allowed but may be essential. In formal writing styles, however, try to find an alternative to this overused pronoun. Two possibilities follow.

- 1) Substitute the third person ('he', 'she', 'it', 'they', or any noun which could be represented by these pronouns) for the second person. A sentence like

'When you walk down the avenue, you can see many varieties of flowers'

can be reworded to read,

'When one walks down the avenue, one can see many varieties of flowers'  
or  
'When people walk down the avenue, they can see . . . .'

Obviously, however, 'one' and 'people' can be just as repetitive as 'you'. For this reason, the second possibility is usually preferable.

- 2) Reword to avoid the need for pronoun reference altogether. The above sentence could simply read,

'Many varieties of flowers line the avenue'.

Notice that such a revision also improves the sentence by eliminating its wordiness.

---

 See Also: *Audience, Sentence Variety*

---

## Repetition of sentence parts or sentence structures can make your writing monotonous.

You can keep your writing fresh and your readers interested by varying the following.

---

### Introductory words.

Are you using an introductory word (like 'However' or 'Obviously') to begin every sentence? Even if you vary the particular word, using any introductory word to begin all or most of your sentences is repetitious.

---

### Your Subjects.

Identify your subjects. Do they change, or are you repeating the same subject sentence after sentence?

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### Your verbs.

Are many or most of your verbs merely forms of 'to be' (am, is, are, was, were) or 'to seem'? Keep these to a minimum. Action verbs will diversify and animate your sentences better than an 'is' or an 'are'.

---

### Pronouns.

Even if your pronoun references are clear, sentences filled with 'hes', 'shes', or 'its' have no sparkle. Try to vary your word choices and strike a balance between your nouns and pronouns.

---

### Sentence Structures.

The same sentence structure (for example, dependent clause/main clause) will quickly drive your reader mad. No particular structure is 'bad', but the repetition of the same structure soon becomes tedious.

---

### Sentence Lengths.

Writing filled with only long or short sentences will either lull your readers to sleep or give them a headache. (Keep in mind, however, that writing styles will dictate the length of your sentences to some degree. 'Technical', for example, will use longer sentences than 'Advertising'.) Strive to vary the length of your sentences; spare your reader the monotony of either extreme.

---

### Prepositional Phrases.

Try to avoid long strings of prepositional phrases when you can. You can turn some prepositional phrases into possessives, some into adverbs and reword or omit others.

Change 'choice of the people' to 'the people's choice'. Change 'the charm of it' to 'its charm'. Change 'in a sudden manner' to the adverb 'suddenly'. Change 'jolly by nature' to 'jolly'.
--

### Consecutive Nouns.

Overusing nouns can deaden your writing and produce sentences like this:

'The proposal for the allowance of additions to the number of ramps providing accessibility for citizens with disabilities has met levels of resistance'.

Such a writing style is certain to lose your reader. You can salvage the above sentence by turning some nouns into verbs and others into adjectives, as in the following:

'The proposal to allow additional access ramps for disabled citizens has met some resistance'.

Notice that reducing the number of nouns in a sentence makes it clearer and less wordy.

---

 See Also: *Long Sentence, Prepositional Phrase, Noun Phrase, Overstated*

When an independent clause contains the modal auxiliary 'would have', always use 'had' (not 'would have') in the accompanying 'if' clause.

Examples:

'If I would have noticed that your hand was stuck in the jam jar, I would have helped you'. [incorrect]
'If I had noticed that your hand was stuck in the jam jar, I would have helped you'. [correct]
'I would have told you if I would have known'. [incorrect]
'I would have told you if I had known'. [correct]

---

 *See Also: Tense Shift*

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## One way to misspell a word is to mistake it for another.

This may be because the word you misspell looks or sounds like the word you have in mind.

Words that look alike may have the same letters in common, only arranged slightly differently, perhaps because you've mistyped them. Words that sound alike, also called homonyms, often present the most difficulty. It may be helpful to distinguish such words by means of a mnemonic (or memory) device. A useful example of this is 'the princIPAL is your PAL'.

What follows is a very partial list of the most frequently confused words. When in doubt, consult your dictionary.

Closest	/	closet	
farther	/	further	
form	/	from	
past	/	passed	
personal	/	personnel	
principal	/	principle	
quiet	/	quite	
than	/	then	
to	/	too	/ two
united	/	untied	
weather	/	whether	

---

 *See Also: Homonym, Split Words*

An infinitive, or infinitive phrase, is 'to' plus the base form of a verb: 'to see', 'to run', 'to feel'.

Avoid 'splitting' infinitives by placing a word or phrase between 'to' and the base form of the verb.

Instead of: 'I had failed to, for some reason, notice him'. Use: 'For some reason, I had failed to notice him'.  
Instead of: 'He likes to occasionally play billiards'. Use: 'Occasionally, he likes to play billiards'.

Sometimes, however, it's more awkward not to split the infinitive. In a sentence like this:

'He decided to really read the books he had only previously skimmed'.

The split infinitive both sounds better than any of its alternatives and places the emphasis of the sentence where it belongs. Rely upon your judgment and your ear in making such decisions.