

PUNCTUATION AND GRAMMAR

Common Errors of Grammar and Usage

- Sentence Fragments: an incomplete sentence punctuated as a sentence.
 - Error: She could not unlock the door. Having lost her keys.
 - Correction: She could not unlock the door since she had lost her keys.
- Run-on Sentences: a run-on sentence continues after it should have stopped.
 - Error: She could not unlock the door since she had lost her keys and then she went to the neighbour's house but he wasn't home so she sat on the step until her mother returned.
 - Correction: She could not unlock the door since she had lost her keys. She went to the neighbour's house but as he wasn't home, she sat on the steps until her mother returned.
- Comma Splice: a comma is used between two independent clauses when there should be a comma, semi-colon, conjunction, etc.
 - Error: He lost her telephone number, he couldn't call her.
 - Correction: He lost her telephone number so he couldn't call her.
- Fused Sentence: no punctuation is used between two independent clauses.
 - Error: He lost her telephone number he couldn't call her.
 - Correction: Since he lost her telephone number, he couldn't call her.
- Faulty Agreement: a verb should always agree in number with its subject.
 - Error: The increase in the fares were unexpected.
 - Correction: The increase in the fares was unexpected.
- Faulty Pronoun Agreement: a pronoun should agree in number and person with the noun to which it refers.
 - Error: If a student needs more information, they should ask at the office.
 - Correction: If a student needs more information, she should ask at the office.
- Misplaced Modifier: creates ambiguity by seeming to look two or more ways at once.
 - Error: She delivered a talk about her trip to the Arctic which was long and colourful.
 - Correction: She delivered a long, colourful talk about her trip to the Arctic.
- Faulty Parallelism: all elements in a parallel construction should be treated equally. Be consistent, for example, in the use of pronouns.
 - Error: He left behind his dogs, his children, and debts.
 - Correction: He left behind his dogs, his children, and his debts.

- Trouble with tenses when writing about literature:
 - -use the present tense, not the past, to describe events in literature.
- Error: Hamlet found the king praying, but was unable to act.
- Correction: Hamlet finds the king praying, and is unable to act.
 - -use it also to describe the author's presence in the text:
 - Correct: Now Shakespeare plays variations on the theme of Hamlet's indecision.
 - -Shift tenses to allow for past, present, and future events in the work:
 - Correct: Hamlet, who has sworn revenge earlier, is unable to act. He will only achieve his revenge later, and by accident.
 - -Use the past tense to place author and work in historical context:
 - Correct: Shakespeare probably completed the play in 1600 or 1601.

Basic Principles of Punctuation

- Use a comma between two independent clauses linked by a coordinate conjunction. (and, but, for, nor, or, yet, so)
 - Error: He wore his heavy scarf and his coat came down to his knees.
 - Correction: He wore his heavy scarf, and his coat came down to his knees.
- Use commas to link items in a series.
 - Correct: She bought a cat, a geranium, a bicycle, and a catamaran.
- Use commas to mark an interruption (which often provides additional but inessential information). The rule in this case is "two commas or none."
 - Error: His request, which is reasonable will be granted.
 - Correction: His request, which is reasonable, will be granted.
- Use parentheses to make a somewhat more pronounced interruption than commas. The interruption may again provide additional but inessential information.
 - Correct: My aunt (my mother's older sister) owns twelve harmonicas.
- Use a dash to make an even more pronounced interruption than commas or parentheses, and to stress a word or phrase. In typed manuscripts, incidentally, use two hyphens, without spaces, to indicate a dash.
 - Correct: Every living thing-the alligator included-made a dash for the door.
 - Correct: He got what he deserved-a black eye.
- Use square brackets to set off your own comments within a quotation. Notice that brackets which enclose *sic* (the Latin for *thus*) identify a mistake or peculiarity in the original.
 - Correct: The essay referred to "watery beer [sic]" in line twelve of Milton's "Lycidas."

- Use a semicolon to link closely related independent clauses.
 - Correct: Her future looks promising; she has been asked to exhibit paintings in Toronto.

- Use a colon to introduce a series, an important clarifying detail, or for a formal introduction to a direct quotation.
 - Correct: The results of the poll are: ten in favour, eight opposed, and two "don't know."
 - Correct: She was ruled by a single ambition: to own a mansion.
 - Correct: Horatio confirms our feelings about the dying Hamlet: "Now cracks a noble heart."

- Use an apostrophe followed by "s" to form the possessive singular of nouns (and follow this rule whatever the final consonant).
 - Correct: James's diary, Keats's poems, the church's door
 - The main exceptions to this rule are a few ancient proper names: Jesus' love, Moses' laws.

- Add an apostrophe, with no following "s", to form the possessive plural of most nouns.
 - Correct: Students' essays, cars' wheels, houses' walls
 - The main exceptions are a few plurals not ending in "s"; write, e.g. women's rights, children's books, sheep's fleeces.

- Add an apostrophe followed by an "s" to form the possessive case for indefinite pronouns.
 - Correct: one's, anybody's, someone else's, etc.
 - Note that the pronominal possessives (his, hers, its, theirs, yours, ours) take no apostrophe.
 - *Avoid the common error of writing "it's" (a contraction for "it is") instead of "its" (the possessive).
 - Error: The cat licked it's paws.
 - Correct: The cat licked its paws.
 - Correct: It's a nice day.

SPELLING

