Grammar for Business Writing

Simple Grammar Rules and Proofreading Strategies

Month, Day, 2009

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1. Comma Usage
Using Clauses and Phrases for Punctuation

2. Pronoun Trouble
Agreement, Case, and Possession

3. Strategies
Proofreading and Writers’ Resources
A **clause** is a group of words that contains both a subject and a verb that complement each other.

A **phrase** is a group of words that does not contain a subject or a verb that complement each other.
After the talk, Dr. Jones will meet with you.
Kinds of Clauses

An **independent clause** has a subject and a verb, and it can stand on its own as a complete sentence.

A **dependent clause** has a subject and a verb, but doesn’t make sense on its own.
If you need accommodations, several hotels are located close to our office by foot or public transportation.
A sentence that contains two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction is called a compound sentence.

A conjunction joins words, phrases, and clauses together in a sentence.

Conjunctions include:
- for
- and
- nor
- but
- or
- yet
- so

FANBOYS
Compound Sentences

The comma in a compound sentence is placed before the coordinating conjunction.

MIT offers parking, but most visitors find riding the MBTA more convenient than driving.
Compound Sentences: Run-Ons

A run-on sentence is usually a compound sentence that hasn’t been punctuated correctly.

Run-on sentences most often take the form of “comma splices,” where two independent clauses are joined by a comma.

Our office is located near Kendall Square in Cambridge, there is a T stop two blocks from our location.
Correcting Comma Splices

- Insert a conjunction between the two independent clauses.
- Start a new sentence.
- Insert a semi-colon between the two independent clauses.

Our office is located near Kendall Square in Cambridge; there is a T stop two blocks from our location.
A dependent clause contains a subject and verb, but the clause cannot stand independently.

Dependent clauses can often be identified by the use of dependent clause markers.

Some dependent clause markers:
- because
- since
- when
- while
- until
- if
- as
- though
- although
- unless
- after
- before
- once
- whether
Dependent phrases and clauses help to clarify and add detail to an independent clause.

Dependent clauses may appear at the beginning, middle, or end of a sentence.
If a dependent clause begins the sentence, use a comma:

*If necessary,* we will provide a computer and projector for your presentation.

If a dependent clause ends a sentence, don’t use a comma:

We will provide a computer and projector for your presentation *if necessary.*

If a dependent clause interrupts a sentence, use two commas:

A computer and laptop will be provided, *if necessary,* for your presentation.
Essential v. Nonessential

An **essential** clause or phrase is used to modify a noun. The information it adds is critical to the meaning of the sentence.

Commas are **not** used for essential phrases.

A **nonessential** clause or phrase adds extra information to the sentence, and can be eliminated without jeopardizing the meaning of the sentence.

Commas **are** used for nonessential phrases.
Essential Phrases and Clauses

Examples:

• Attendees with special food requirements should contact the event organizer.

• The event that Jill planned was cancelled.

“That” is often (but not always) used in essential phrases.
Nonessential Phrases and Clauses

Examples:
• Jill’s event, **already postponed**, was cancelled.
• Dr. Smith, **who just won a major award**, was granted tenure.

Even without the phrase or clause the sentences still communicate the same idea:
• Jill’s event was cancelled.
• Dr. Smith was granted tenure.
Pronoun Trouble

Agreement, Case, and Possession
When Do Pronouns Matter?

1. Case
   - “I” or “me”? “Who” or “whom”?

2. Clarity
   - To whom or what does a pronoun refer?

3. Agreement
   - Do all pronouns and verbs match?
## Pronoun Case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjective</th>
<th>Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td>you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he/she/it</td>
<td>him/her/it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we</td>
<td>us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they</td>
<td>them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who</td>
<td>whom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pronoun Case: “Me” vs. “I”

In combination:

She runs the seminar with Ari and me.

Comparisons:

They have more information on that subject than me.
The room is small, but I don’t think they will object. Who’s “they”? The laptop has PowerPoint, but it may not work well. The laptop or PowerPoint? Steven ran a workshop on organization last summer. This may be his strength. Running workshops or organizing?
Pronoun Agreement

**Agreement in Number:**
If an attendee has special dietary needs, they should contact the seminar coordinators.

**Agreement in Person:**
If you have special dietary needs, you should contact the seminar coordinators.
Proofreading Strategies
General Strategies

The Five-Minute Rule: Take a short break between writing and proofreading so you can look at your document with fresh eyes.

Read slowly: Give your eyes enough time to spot errors.

Read aloud: Writers can usually hear errors that they can’t spot visually.

Read backwards: Removing sentences from their context makes errors easier to notice.

Know thyself: Writers tend to make the same errors all the time. If you know what errors you frequently make, you can read just for those errors.
Common Errors to Watch Out For

Spelling

• Spellcheck will not catch all mistakes, especially homonyms. Spellcheck will not tell you that the following sentence is wrong:

  “Aye can knot sea Miss steaks.”

• The most common homophone error is the use of the wrong version of **too/two/to** or **there/their/they’re**.
Common Errors to Watch Out For

Omitted and Doubled Words

• Reading the paper aloud (and slowly) can help you make sure you haven't missed or repeated any words.

Apostrophes

• Most apostrophe errors mix up its and it’s. Its is the possessive pronoun. It’s is the contraction of it is.
Common Errors to Watch Out For

Subject-Verb Agreement

• Be sure single and plural subjects are paired with the right verb.

• Example: Organizational skills and planning is very important to master.

• Edited example: Organizational skills and planning are very important to master.
The Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue
The OWL offers user-friendly and clear instruction on the writing process, academic and business writing, grammar, and style.

Grammar Girl
The personable host, Mignon Fogarty, provides weekly podcasts explaining common grammar and style problems, as well as hotly debated grammar rules. The podcasts are short and entertaining. Transcripts are available on the site.

Strunk’s Elements of Style
Though written in 1918, writers still find William Strunk’s guide to style useful. The print version, updated by E.B. White and now in its fourth edition, is the standard style guide for writers.
Grammar and Writing Resources

Writing Help Office Hours

Mondays 10:00-11:00 a.m. or by appointment.
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