

Grammar Tip #1

Greetings and welcome to a new academic year! Last year I devoted the weekly columns to teaching principles of Plain English, which promotes clear writing. This semester I would like to review rules of punctuation, as many students have trouble with this. I'm sure your professors would appreciate papers with fewer errors to correct. If you know the ground rules, it will be much easier to make the right decision as you arrange your well chosen words.

I am going to skip the rules about end punctuation, as everyone knows to end a sentence with the proper mark—a period for declaratory statements, a question mark for questions, and an exclamation point for excited utterances. As I write this, however, it occurs to me that sometimes writers confuse direct questions, calling for a question mark, with indirect questions, which end with a period. Here are some examples of what I am talking about:

Direct Questions:

1. Have you had lunch yet?
2. When are you leaving for California?
3. Can I count on you to help?

Now, let's look for examples of instances where the writer describes a question that arose, but isn't directing a question to anyone.

1. I was wondering if you have had lunch yet.
2. I don't think he has decided yet when he is leaving for California.
3. I may be asking you if I can count on you to help.

Now for some comments about word order. Notice that when asking a direct question, the word order is inverted, and the subject comes between the words of a verb phrase: Have you had, are you leaving, can I count. In an indirect question, the word order is normal: was wondering, is leaving, can count.

I will close with a reminder about the exclamation mark—don't overdo it! It loses its effectiveness if every other sentence ends with a bang.

Grammar Tip #2

Last week, we explored end punctuation. For the next few weeks, I will review the rules regarding comma usage. Many students seem to think that commas are a question of preference, but this is not the case. If you remember the rules, you'll know when to use it or not.

I will take many of my explanations and examples from Purdue University's excellent Online Writing Lab, and add some explanations and examples of my own. To avoid being overwhelmed, I will discuss five rules a week. In less than a month, you'll be a pro!

Use a Comma to Separate Two Independent Clauses

1. Use commas to separate independent clauses when they are followed by any of these seven coordinating conjunctions: *For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, and So*.

The game was over, **but** the crowd refused to leave.

The student explained her question, **yet** the instructor still didn't seem to understand.

Yesterday was her brother's birthday, **so** she took him out to dinner.

In each of the above examples, the sentence contains two independent clauses. The connecting word to choose depends on the relationship between the two clauses.

Use a Comma to Set off an Introductory Phrase or Clause

2. Use commas after introductory phrases, clauses, or words..

For sentence variety, it is good to introduce a sentence with a phrase or clause that comes before the subject. Set off these introductory words with a comma.

Because her alarm clock was broken, she was late for class (dependent clause).

Having finished the test, he left the room → (participle phrase).

To get a seat, you'd better come early → (infinitive phrase).

For the rest of the day, he was very subdued. → (prepositional phrase)

Well, perhaps he meant no harm. (introductory word)

However, you may not be satisfied with the results (conjunctive adverb)

Have you ever had a teacher tell you it is wrong to start a sentence with because? As the above example shows, this is not correct. It is perfectly fine to begin a sentence with a clause beginning with because as long as you set it off with a comma and continue on to your main clause.

Use a Comma to Set off Descriptive Phrases or Clauses

3. Descriptive phrases that are not essential to the meaning of the words they describe are set off by commas before and after. The added information is good to know but is not necessary to identify the thing you are talking about and could be omitted without harming the sentence.

Examples:

Clause: That Tuesday, *which happens to be my birthday*, is the only day when I am available to meet.

Phrase: This restaurant has an exciting atmosphere. The food, *on the other hand*, is rather bland.

Word: I appreciate your hard work. In this case, *however*, you seem to have over-exerted yourself.

Use Commas to Separate items in a Series

4. Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series. Use a comma after each word in the series except the last one.

The Constitution establishes the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government.

The candidate promised to lower taxes, protect the environment, reduce crime, and end unemployment.

Use Commas to Separate Adjectives

5. Use commas to separate two or more coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun. Do not use commas if one of the adjectives is an inherent quality of the object, such as color or age.

He was a difficult, stubborn child. (use commas)

She wore a beautiful, shiny scarf. (use commas)

They lived in a white frame house. (no commas)

He was a mean old man. (no commas)

Grammar Tip #3

Last week I discussed five rules about commas. This week we will continue with five more, based on guidelines by Purdue University' Online Writing Lab (OWL), supplemented by some of my own examples and explanations.

6. Use a comma near the end of a sentence to separate contrasting ideas, to indicate a distinct pause or shift, or ask a confirming question.

He was merely ignorant, not stupid.

The chimpanzee seemed reflective, almost human.

You're one of the senator's close friends, aren't you?

Note that the last example is in the form of a negative ("aren't you?" to indicate a positive (You are one of the Senator's close friends). The reverse is also true: You aren't friends with the Senator, are you? In case you're interested, these are called tag questions.

7. Use commas to set off participle phrases that describe an action taken by a person identified elsewhere in the sentence. Be sure to place the phrase so that there is no confusion as to who is performing the action.

Nancy waved enthusiastically at the docking ship, laughing joyously. (correct)

Better: Laughing joyously, Nancy waved at the docking ship.

INCORRECT: Lisa waved at Nancy, laughing joyously. (Who is laughing, Lisa or Nancy?)

Laughing joyously, Lisa waved at Nancy. (correct)

Lisa waved at Nancy, who was laughing joyously. (correct)

8. Use commas to set off geographical names, items in exact dates (not month and day), addresses (except the street number and name), and titles in names.

Birmingham, Alabama, gets its name from Birmingham, England.

July 22, 1959, was a momentous day in his life. Who lives at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C.?

Rachel B. Lake, MD, will be the principal speaker.

(NOTE: When you use just the month and the year, no comma is necessary after the month or year: "The average temperatures for July 1998 are the highest on record for that month.")

9. Use a comma to introduce a speaker's quotation.

John said without emotion, "I'll see you tomorrow."

"I was able," she answered, "to complete the assignment."

"Workers of the world, unite!" was Karl Marx's slogan.

NOTE: In the above examples, the speaker identification comes at the beginning, middle, and end of the sentence.

10. Use commas wherever necessary to prevent possible confusion or misreading.

To George, Harrison had been a sort of idol.

For the last few weeks, we have been reviewing the rules of comma usage. This week, I am going to go over the rules for not using a comma. Commas in the wrong places can break a sentence into illogical segments or confuse readers with unnecessary and unexpected pauses. Once again, thanks to Purdue's Online Writing Lab for the inspiration for this column.

11. Don't use a comma to separate the subject from the verb.

INCORRECT: An eighteen-year old in California, is now considered an adult.

INCORRECT: The most important attribute of a ball player, is quick reflex actions.

(Notice that the subject is followed by a prepositional phrase. This doesn't change the rule.)

12. Don't put a comma between two nouns, verbs, phrases, or clauses in a compound construction (i.e., only two items).

INCORRECT: (compound object): Jeff told me that the job was still available, and that the manager wanted to interview me.

INCORRECT: I turned the corner, and ran smack into a patrol car.

Correct the sentences by deleting the comma.

(Notice that in the above examples there is one subject and two verbs or two objects, not two independent clauses, which would be separated by a comma.)

13. Don't put a comma after the main clause when a dependent (subordinate) clause follows it (except for cases of contrast).

INCORRECT: The cat scratched at the door, while I was eating.

CORRECT: She was still quite upset, although she had won the Oscar. (This comma use is correct because it is an example of contrast)

CORRECT: My fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man."

(President John Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961)

14. Do not use commas to set off essential elements of the sentence, such as clauses beginning with *that* or *who* (relative clauses).

CORRECT: The book *that I borrowed from you* is excellent.

CORRECT: She believes *that she will be able to earn an A*.

CORRECT: Students *who cheat* only harm themselves.

CORRECT: The baby *wearing a yellow jumpsuit* is my niece.

NOTE: These sentences can be rewritten as descriptive phrases which are set off by commas:

Mary, *who believes that she will be able to earn an A*, is just fooling herself.

Fred, *who has chosen to cheat his way through school*, is only harming himself.

My niece, *who is wearing a yellow jumpsuit*, is playing in the living room.

15. Do not punctuate a compound sentence containing two independent clauses with only a comma; that is the dreaded **comma splice!**

INCORRECT: I like dogs, he likes cats.

Instead, use one of these alternatives:

- Break the sentence into two sentences, separated by a period.

I like dogs. He likes cats.

- Convert the comma to a semi-colon.

I like dogs; he likes cats.

- Keep the comma and add a coordinating conjunction (one of the FANBOYS: For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So).

I like dogs, but he likes cats.

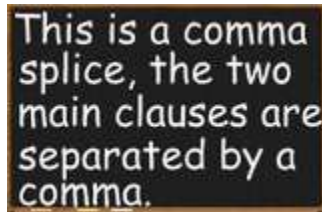
NOTE: Not all FANBOY words are interchangeable. The correct choice depends on the relationship between the two clauses.

Now, you know everything you need to know about commas, but didn't know to ask.

Comma Splices and Runon Sentences

Now that we have mastered the art and craft of proper comma placement, I am going to post a tutorial on the dreaded comma splice and its evil twin, the runon sentence. The cure for both is similar, as long as you know where the first independent clause ends.

EXAMPLE OF COMMA SPLICE: In this example, two independent clauses are separated ONLY by a comma. Remember, a comma alone is not strong enough to separate two stand-alone sentences.



This is a comma splice, the two main clauses are separated by a comma.

Source: <http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/comsplice.htm>

EXAMPLE OF A RUNON SENTENCE (The same sentence without the comma or without any separating punctuation whatsoever):

This is a comma splice the two main clauses are separated by a comma.

Notice the irony that without the comma the sentence is now false! A more authentic example would be as follows:

This is a runon sentence the two main clauses are mashed together without any separating punctuation.

HOW TO CORRECT COMMA SPLICES AND RUNONS:

1. Change the comma to a semi-colon. In a runon sentence, the semi-colon would be placed at the end of the independent clause. The first word after the semi-colon is lower case, indicating that the two parts of the sentence form a whole.

This is a comma splice; the two main clauses are separated by a comma.

This is a runon sentence; the two main clauses are mashed together without any separating punctuation.

NOTE: When using a semi-colon to separate two independent clauses, You may, if you wish, introduce the second clause with a transition word called a conjunctive adverb to show the relationship between the two clauses.

EXAMPLE: I prepared a great dessert; however, my family was too full to eat it.

2. Divide the sentence into two separate sentences, each ending in a period.

This was a comma splice. The two main clauses were separated by a comma.

This was a runon sentence. The two main clauses were mashed together without any separating punctuation.

(Notice how I changed the language to reflect the reality of what I am trying to exemplify.)

3. Retain the comma, but follow it by one of the coordinating conjunctions, also known as the FANBOYS (For, And, Nor, But, Or, So, and Yet).

This is not a comma splice, for the two main clauses are separated by a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction.

This is not a runon sentence, for the two main clauses are separated by a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction.

4. Rewrite the sentence to contain a main clause and a subordinate clause.

Whenever there are two main clauses are separated only by a comma, you have a comma splice.

Whenever you have two main clauses without any separating punctuation, you have a runon sentence.

You may ask, "Hey, wait a minute! Aren't these comma splices?"

The answer is...No, because the introductory clause cannot stand alone as a complete sentence. The introductory word "Whenever" is a signal that the clause needs to be followed by a main clause to complete that thought.

So now you know all you need to know to have perfect sentence structure on your papers.

Grammar Tip #6

Sentence Fragments

Continuing our instructions on proper sentence structure, this week we will work on fragments. I am adapting some explanations, examples, and exercises from **Purdue University's Online Writing Center (OWL), adding some of my own.**

Fragments, as their name suggests, are parts of sentences. Often, fragments are afterthoughts that have become disconnected from the main clause, and all you need to do to correct it is to join the two pieces together, using appropriate punctuation. Please refer to the following examples, in which the fragment appears in red.

Fragment: Purdue offers many majors in engineering. *Such as electrical, chemical, and industrial engineering.*

Possible Revision: Purdue offers many majors in engineering, *such as electrical, chemical, and industrial engineering.*

Fragment: I need to find a new roommate. *Because the one I have now isn't working out too well.*

Possible Revision: I need to find a new roommate *because the one I have now isn't working out too well.*

NOTE: You may occasionally encounter an article in a magazine or newspaper in which the writer deliberately uses a fragment for emphasis, giving an abrupt effect, causing the reader to take pause. As long as this technique is not overdone, it is acceptable in journalism, but not in academic writing.

Other fragments are not clearly pieces of sentences that need to be stitched together, but are simply phrases that lack a subject or main verb or both.

Example: No subject and no main verb

Fragment: *A story with deep thoughts and emotions.*

Possible Revisions (with added language in blue):

- *Convert the fragment to a Direct object: She told a story with deep thoughts and emotions.*

- *Convert the fragment to an Appositive Phrase:* Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," a story with deep thoughts and emotions, has impressed critics for decades.

Example: No verb

Fragment: Toys of all kinds thrown everywhere.

Possible Revisions:

- *Add a word to form a complete verb:* Toys of all kinds were thrown everywhere.
- *Convert the fragment to a Direct Object:* They found toys of all kinds thrown everywhere.

Example: No Subject. (This sometimes occurs because the writer has introduced the sentence with an unnecessary and awkward prepositional phrase.)

Fragment: With the ultimate effect of all advertising is to sell the product.

Possible Revision:

- *Remove preposition:* The ultimate effect of all advertising is to sell the product.

Fragment: By paying too much attention to polls can make a political leader unwilling to propose innovative policies.

Possible Revision:

- *Remove preposition:* Paying too much attention to polls can make a political leader unwilling to propose innovative policies.

Next week: Exercises on correcting fragments.

Excuse me; I mean:

Next week's column will consist of exercises on correcting fragments.

Grammar Tip #7

Sentence Fragments Exercises

This week we are going to have a variety of exercises correcting sentence fragments, **selected from Purdue University's Online Writing Lab**; answers next week. Oops! I mean the answers will appear next week. Enjoy!

Exercise: Sentence Fragments Exercise 1

The sentences below appeared in papers written by students. Mark a C if the sentences are complete and an F if any sentence in the group is a fragment.

___ 1. Then I attended Morris Junior High. A junior high that was a bad experience.

___ 2. The scene was filled with beauty. Such as the sun sending its brilliant rays to the earth and the leaves of various shades of red, yellow, and brown moving slowly in the wind.

___ 3. He talked for fifty minutes without taking his eyes off his notes. Like other teachers in that department, he did not encourage students' questions.

___ 4. Within each group, a wide range of features to choose from. It was difficult to distinguish between them.

___ 5. A few of the less serious fellows would go into a bar for a steak dinner and a few glasses of beer. After this meal, they were ready for anything.

Exercise : Sentence Fragments Exercise 2

These paragraphs contain fragments. Use the space below each paragraph for revising.

1. How can a person find patriotism in a local night club? Well, it did not take me too long. About four weeks ago in a little night club in Louisville, Kentucky, a couple of my friends, Rick and Lon, the duo who were providing the entertainment that night for the club.

2. For the past twenty years, the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan has been measuring the level of Americans' trust and confidence in

their politicians and quasi-political trust and confidence in their political institutions and their leaders. "Political" being all levels of government, and "quasi-political" churches, labor unions, large professional/business associations, educational institutions, and the like. The result is that a very sharp decline has taken place every year since 1964.

3. For 200 years Americans believed in better jobs, better homes, a better life for one's children. This confidence no longer exists. Polls now indicate that fewer Americans feel they are better off today than they were five years ago. A public-opinion analysis group has found that large numbers of Americans, at some times and in some places, see themselves as lower on the ladder. Adding worse living conditions and anticipation of further decline over the next five years.

Exercise : Sentence Fragments Exercise 3

The following paragraph has no capital letters or periods to mark the beginnings and ends of sentences. Add capitals, periods, commas, and/or other punctuation that may be needed to make the word groups into complete sentences. Your goal is to be sure that there are no fragments.

...

my brother was always my best friend when I was a child especially as we two were almost alone in the world we lived with our old grandmother in a little house, almost a shack, in the country whenever I think of him now I see a solemn, responsible boy a boy too old for his years who looked out for me no matter what once there was a bully John Anson who looked enormous to me though he was probably an average twelve-year-old John had it in for me because he liked Littice Grant who liked me he decided to beat me up right before her eyes I was lucky my brother came by he didn't interfere any he just stood there somehow though his presence gave me confidence I licked the stuffing out of John Anson if my brother hadn't been there I don't think I could have done it.

Sentence Fragments Exercises

This week we are going to have a variety of exercises correcting sentence fragments, **selected from Purdue University's Online Writing Lab**; answers next week. Oops! I mean the answers will appear next week. Enjoy!

Exercise: Sentence Fragments Exercise 1

The sentences below appeared in papers written by students. Mark a C if the sentences are complete and an F if any sentence in the group is a fragment.

F 1. Then I attended Morris Junior High. A junior high that was a bad experience.

F 2. The scene was filled with beauty. Such as the sun sending its brilliant rays to the earth and the leaves of various shades of red, yellow, and brown moving slowly in the wind.

C 3. He talked for fifty minutes without taking his eyes off his notes. Like other teachers in that department, he did not encourage students' questions.

F 4. Within each group, a wide range of features to choose from. It was difficult to distinguish between them.

C 5. A few of the less serious fellows would go into a bar for a steak dinner and a few glasses of beer. After this meal, they were ready for anything.

Exercise: Sentence Fragments Exercise 2

These paragraphs contain fragments. Use the space below each paragraph for revising.

1. How can a person find patriotism in a local night club? Well, it did not take me too long. About four weeks ago in a little night club in Louisville, Kentucky, a couple of my friends, Rick and Lon, the duo who were providing the entertainment that night for the club.

Revised:

How can a person find patriotism in a local night club? Well, it did not take me too long. About four weeks ago in a little night club in Louisville, Kentucky, a couple of my friends, Rick and Lon, the duo who were providing the entertainment that night for the club, **performed rock versions of patriotic tunes.**

2. For the past twenty years, the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan has been measuring the level of Americans' trust and confidence in their politicians and quasi-political trust and confidence in their political institutions and their leaders. "Political" being all levels of government, and "quasi-political" churches, labor unions, large professional/business associations, educational institutions, and the like. The result is that a very sharp decline has taken place every year since 1964.

Revised:

For the past twenty years, the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan has been measuring the level of Americans' trust and confidence in their political **and quasi-political** institutions and their leaders. **For purposes of the survey, "political" is defined as** all levels of government, and "quasi-political" **is defined as** churches, labor unions, large professional/business associations, educational institutions, and the like. The **survey results show that** a very sharp decline has taken place every year since 1964.

(NOTE: The above answer was also edited considerably for clarity.)

3. For 200 years Americans believed in better jobs, better homes, a better life for one's children. This confidence no longer exists. Polls now indicate that fewer Americans feel they are better off today than they were five years ago. A public-opinion analysis group has found that large numbers of Americans, at some times and in some places, see themselves as lower on the ladder. Adding worse living conditions and anticipation of further decline over the next five years.

Revised:

For 200 years Americans believed in better jobs, better homes, **and** a better life for one's children **as time goes on**. This confidence no longer exists. Polls now indicate that fewer Americans feel they are better off today than they were five years ago. A public-opinion analysis group has found that large numbers of Americans, at some times and in some places, see themselves as lower on the ladder. **The survey documents a trend of** **worsening** living conditions and **anticipates** further decline over the next five years.

Exercise: Sentence Fragments Exercise 3

The following paragraph has no capital letters or periods to mark the beginnings and ends of sentences. Add capitals, periods, commas, and/or other punctuation that may be needed to make the word groups into complete sentences. Your goal is to be sure that there are no fragments.

my brother was always my best friend when I was a child especially as we two were almost alone in the world we lived with our old grandmother in a little house, almost a shack, in the country whenever I think of him now I see a solemn, responsible boy a boy too old for his years who looked out for me no matter what once there was a bully John Anson who looked enormous to me though he was probably an average twelve-year-old John had it in for me because he liked Littice Grant who liked me he decided to beat me up right before her eyes I was lucky my brother came by he didn't interfere any he just stood there somehow though his presence gave me confidence I licked the stuffing out of John Anson if my brother hadn't been there I don't think I could have done it.

Revised:

My brother was always my best friend when I was a child, especially as we two were almost alone in the world. We lived with our old grandmother in a little house, almost a shack, in the country. Whenever I think of my brother now, I see a solemn, responsible boy, a boy too old for his years who looked out for me no matter what. Once there was a bully, John Anson, who looked enormous to me, though he was probably an average twelve-year-old. John had it in for me because he liked Littice Grant, who liked me. He decided to beat me up right before her eyes. I was lucky my brother came by. He didn't interfere any; he just stood there. Somehow, though, his presence gave me confidence and I licked the stuffing out of John Anson. If my brother hadn't been there, I don't think I could have done it.

NOTE: If you caught all the errors on this passage, then you are truly a master of sentence structure. Congratulations!

Grammar Tip #9

Semi-Colon

This week, we are going to take another look at the semi-colon, which we learned as one option to correct a run-on sentence or comma splice. A semi-colon is used to join two related independent clauses. Please note that the resulting sentence is considered a single sentence. This means that the first word after the semi-**colon is not capitalized (unless it's a proper noun)**.

EXAMPLES:

The door swung open; a masked figure strode in.

She was very tired; she had worked late the night before.

He never took any exercise; consequently, he became very fat.

Note that in the last example, the second part of the sentence is introduced by a conjunctive adverb.

There is another, lesser known use for the semi-colon—use it to separate items in a series that have an internal comma. Otherwise, you would be drowning in commas.

EXAMPLE:

Presenting at the conference were Professor Adams, Chair of the Art Department at Auburn University; Professor Bernstein, Chair of the Biology Department at Boston University; and Professor Charles, Head of the Chemistry Department at Colorado State University.

NOTE: Use this technique even if only one item in the series has a comma.

Here are some exercises for you to try; answers next week.

Oops! I mean Here are some exercises for you to try; answers will be provided next week. You will need to insert commas and semi-colons.

1. The puppy had been sadly neglected it was in an awful state.
2. On our cross-country trip we visited Boston Massachusetts Springfield Illinois and Santa Fe New Mexico.
3. John opened the drawer it was empty.
4. My favourite sandwiches are bacon lettuce and tomato peanut butter and jelly and ham and cheese.
5. The wedding invitations have all been sent out two hundred guests are expected.
6. At the Shakespeare festival we saw ***All's Well that Ends Well*** a comedy *Richard II* a historical drama and *Hamlet* **Shakespeare's best known** tragedy.
7. Tom was very clever and worked hard he deserved to pass all his tests.
8. Next fall I will be taking ACC 211 Principles of Accounting BUS 116 Entrepreneurship and COM 114 Mass Media.
9. **Sally's birthday is in November John's is in September.**
10. **Next month we will be celebrating two birthdays: John's whose birthday is on December 4 and Lynette's whose birthday is on December 28.**

Adapted from a powerpoint by Lara J. Brown, Semi-Colons: Where should they go? <http://www.primaryresources.co.uk/english/englishB8.htm>

Answers will be provided next week.

Semi-Colon

As promised, here are the answers to last week's exercises on the semi-colon. Look for the punctuation marks in red.

NOTE: The semi-**colon is to the right of the "L" key on your keyboard, lower level.**

1. The puppy had been sadly neglected; it was in an awful state.
2. On our cross-country trip we visited Boston, Massachusetts; Springfield, Illinois; and Santa Fe, New Mexico.
3. John opened the drawer; it was empty.
4. My favorite sandwiches are bacon, lettuce, and tomato; peanut butter and jelly; and ham and cheese.
5. The wedding invitations have all been sent out; two hundred guests are expected.
6. At the Shakespeare festival we saw ***All's Well that Ends Well***, a comedy; *Richard II*, a historical drama; and *Hamlet*, **Shakespeare's best known** tragedy.
7. Tom was very clever and worked hard; he deserved to pass all his tests.
8. Next fall I will be taking ACC 211, Principles of Accounting; BUS 116, Entrepreneurship; and COM 114, Mass Media.
9. **Sally's birthday is in November; John's is in September.**
10. **Next month we will be celebrating two birthdays: John's**, whose birthday is on December 4; **and Lynette's**, whose birthday is on December 28.

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Notice that this exercise highlights two uses of the semi-colon: separating two independent clauses of a compound sentence and separating items in a series when one or more items contains a comma followed by a descriptive phrase.

Colons: Part One

For the last 2 weeks, I have been writing about the proper use of the semi-colon. This week, I am going to write about the colon. It is on the same key on your keyboard as the semi-colon. The colon (:) is on top, and the semi-colon (;) is on the lower portion of the key.

Like the semi-colon, there are multiple uses for the colon: to address a business letter, introduce a list, and to introduce a lengthy quotation. Following are some humorous examples, which I obtained from the Grammars for Dummies and Lynn Library websites, along with some additional items, explanations and comments of my own.

1. Addressing a Business Letter

Insert a colon after the name of the person you are addressing.

EXAMPLE:

Dear Mr. Ganglia:

You are getting on my nerves. You're fired.

Sincerely,

I.M. Incharj

NOTE: In a personal letter, put a comma instead of a colon after the name of the person who will receive the letter.

EXAMPLE:

Dear Paula,

2. Using colons to introduce lists

Lists may or may not be introduced by a colon. Use a colon when the lead-in language contains a trigger word such as "these things," "the following," etc.

EXAMPLE:

General Parker needed quite a few things: a horse, an army, a suit of armor, a few million arrows, a map, and a battle plan.

3. Not using a colon to introduce a list

If there is no indication of a list coming, don't use a colon, as this will interrupt the flow of words.

EXAMPLE (Correct):

My favorite fruits are apples, peaches, and strawberries.

EXAMPLE (Incorrect):

The problems with Parker's battle plan are: no understanding of enemy troop movements, a lack of shelter and food for the troops, and a faulty trigger for the retreat signal.

- 4. Using a phrase following a colon to explain an item in the preceding sentence.**

EXAMPLE:

I expect just one thing from you in this class: that you do your best.

What is that one thing? The phrase after the colon answers that question.

- 5. To separate hours and minutes in notations of time**

EXAMPLE:

8:00 a.m.

- 6. To separate Biblical chapters and verses**

EXAMPLE:

Matthew 1:6

- 7. To Introduce a subtitle**

EXAMPLE:

Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America

Now for a quiz on the proper use of colons, courtesy of the Online Writing Lab. Please insert a colon where appropriate.

1. Many jobs interest me teaching, writing, editing, and social work.

2. There were a number of famous people at the restaurant Brittany Spears, Jack Nicholson, and Helen Hunt.

3. There are a lot of chores I do not like doing dishes, washing windows, and vacuuming rugs.

4. He was a world class athlete a rowing champion.

5. She did not pass the most important of her exams math.

6. I like all kinds of desserts lemon pie, carrot cake, strawberry ice cream, and chocolate pudding.

7. Some cities are known for being friendly Buffalo.

8. There are several hobbies I particularly enjoy cake decorating, dancing, and bicycling.

9. One factor made our winter more difficult than usual ice storms.

10. She prized only one possession her diamond necklace.

And for further grins (or is that grimaces?), here is a link to a quiz on the proper use of periods, commas, and colons:

<http://www.niu.edu/writingtutorial/punctuation/quizzes/Comma.htm>

Apostrophe, Part One

This week we are going to review the correct use of the apostrophe. First, let's locate it on the keyboard: It's two keys to the right of the L, lower level. It can also be used as a single quotation mark, which is a topic for another column.

I have adapted the following examples from a presentation by John Langan, based on *Sentence Skills: A Workbook for Writers, Form A*, published by McGraw Hill.

There are two uses for the apostrophe: Contractions and Possession.

Contractions

- When two words are combined to make one word, an apostrophe is used to show where letters have been omitted. This is called a contraction.
- Contractions are used in speech and in informal writing, but not for academic writing.

EXAMPLES:

I would = I'd I have = I've Did not = Didn't Let us = Let's

NOTE: Be sure to put the apostrophe in the right place: Don't, not don't.

NOTE: "It's" and "its" are often confused.

Use "it's" (contraction) when you mean to say "It is."

EXAMPLE: **It's raining.**

Use its (no apostrophe) **as an adjective to mean "belonging to it."**

EXAMPLE: The cat was licking its paws.

NOTE: Not all contractions are shortened forms of the two words that are combined.

EXAMPLE: Will not = won't.

Possession

The second use of the apostrophe is to show possession. You do this by adding 's to the end of the word. This is a two-step process. First, you

determine whether the owner is singular or plural, then form the possessive.

1. Singular nouns

EXAMPLE: The bicycle belonging to the boy = the boy's bike.

NOTE: If the boy owns more than one bike, the possessive is not changed.

The bicycles belonging to the boy = The boy's bikes.

2. Plural nouns

If the owner is plural, form the plural and add an apostrophe.

EXAMPLE: Two weeks' pay.

3. Plurals not ending in s

If the plural form of the word does not end in s (men, women, children), form the plural and add 's.

EXAMPLE: The men's department.

You may either add an apostrophe to the word to form the possessive, or add 's. Whichever form you choose, be consistent throughout your essay.

4. Singular nouns ending in s

If the singular form of a noun ends in s, you may either add an apostrophe (') or apostrophe s ('s) to form the possessive.

EXAMPLE: The lass' bonnet, OR the lass's bonnet.

NOTE: Whichever form you choose, be consistent throughout your paper.

Grammar Tip #13

Apostrophe, Part Two

That little apostrophe can be confusing! This week's lesson is designed to clear up any confusion.

1. **Don't confuse possessive singular with possessive plural.**

EXAMPLE: **The boy's bike (one bike, one owner – possessive singular)**

EXAMPLE: **The boys' bike (one bike, two owners) – possessive plural**

EXAMPLE: **The boy's bikes (two bikes, one owner) – possessive singular**

EXAMPLE: **The boys' bikes (many bikes, many owners) – possessive plural**

2. **Don't confuse possessives with plurals.**

EXAMPLE: **Are you coming to girls' night out?** (possessive)

EXAMPLE: Some of my girlfriends are joining me for a night out. (plural)

3. Special case: Sometimes when you are talking about a single letter (like your mid-term grade), it is necessary to form the plural with an apostrophe.

EXAMPLE: I got all A's on my mid-terms.

NOTE: If we didn't use an apostrophe to form the plural, the A would become As.

4. **Don't confuse possessives with contractions. The most famous example is who's and whose.**

EXAMPLE: Whose woods these are I think I know. (possessive adjective)

I can't resist sharing with you a link to the most beautiful choral version of Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening:"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5vyqS61S6U>

EXAMPLE: Whose turn is it now? (another possessive adjective)

EXAMPLE: **Who's there?** (contraction for who is)

Grammar Tip #14

12 DAYS OF A TUTOR'S CHRISTMAS

On the twelfth day of Christmas, my tutor gave to me

- 12 Dictionaries
- 11 Thesis Statements
- 10 Descriptive Essays
- 9 Paraphrases
- 8 Databases
- 7 Semi-colons
- 6 Reference Pages
- 5 Powerpoints
- 4 Charts and Graphs
- 3 Block Quotes
- 2 Apostrophes
- 1 A One-on-One Appointment with Me

WEEKLY WISDOM

Greetings and welcome to a new year and a new semester!

This semester I am going to share with you one of my favorite websites: 20 Most Common Errors among college students, found on The Everyday Writer, http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/everyday_writer/20errors/

To make sure I cover them all, I will occasionally combine two related errors.

The #1 error, in order of frequency, is a missing comma after an introductory phrase or clause. This is a good way to start a sentence, as it is more interesting than the standard subject-verb-object order. Remember to set off these elements with a **comma** and proceed with a complete sentence.

EXAMPLES:

To be honest, I had forgotten all about it (Infinitive phrase).

Going forward, we will no longer be using Blackboard as our platform (participial phrase).

In the morning, you will receive a survey by e-mail (prepositional phrase).

Because I was late, I **missed important instructions on this week's assignment** (Introductory clause).

Frankly, my dear, **I don't give a damn (adverb followed by direct address)**.

Note: These constructions should not be confused with comma splices, which are the erroneous use of commas to separate two complete sentences. None of the above introductory words form a complete sentence.

Now for some exercises. Please insert a comma if needed in the blank space. If a comma is not needed, leave it blank.

1. Every time I start to take the quiz __ I get an error message.
2. Thinking about spring break __ helps me get through the semester.
3. Frank __ could you come here a minute?
4. At the last minute __ I remembered my cell phone.
5. To the victors __ go the spoils.

Answers next week!

SPECIAL NOTE: A related error that I have noticed is starting a sentence with an unnecessary prepositional phrase. These sentences often finish up with an **unnecessary “it,” which weakens the effectiveness of the sentence.**

BEFORE: By taking the short cut, it saves a lot of time.

AFTER: Taking the short cut saves a lot of time.

WEEKLY WISDOM #16

Welcome to Week 2 of the semester! I will start by giving answers to last week's quiz questions on setting off introductory phrases or clauses with a comma.

INSTRUCTIONS: Please insert a comma if needed in the blank space. If a comma is not needed, leave it blank.

1. Every time I start to take the quiz **COMMA** I get an error message.
2. Thinking about spring break **NO COMMA** helps me get through the semester.
3. Frank **COMMA** could you come here a minute?
4. At the last minute **COMMA** I remembered my cell phone.
5. To the victors **NO COMMA** go the spoils.

This week's error to avoid is vague pronoun references.

This error involves using a pronoun where it is not clear what noun the pronoun is referring back to. (The noun is called the antecedent; mention the noun first, the pronoun next).

WRONG: When he took the podium, John appeared nervous.

(Who is "he"? Not clear until John is named.)

RIGHT: When John took the podium, he appeared nervous.

If you are talking about two or more people of the same sex, it may not be clear which one the pronoun is referring to. You may need to rearrange the sentence to avoid confusion.

WRONG: When Mary criticized Emma, she deserved what she got.

(Who is "she"?)

RIGHT: Emma deserved the criticism that Mary gave her.

OR

RIGHT: Mary deserved being reprimanded for criticizing the team leader Emma.

Here is another ambiguous example:

UNCLEAR: The school prohibited smoking in the classroom buildings, which many students resented.

What did the students resent, smoking in the classroom, or prohibiting it? The writer knows what he or she had in mind, but not the reader. To clear up the **confusion, insert a noun before the pronoun “which” to specify what you mean.**

CLEAR: The school prohibited smoking in the classroom buildings, **a policy** which many students resented.

Another kind of pronoun reference error has a hidden antecedent: a pronoun without a noun.

UNCLEAR: The club treasury was depleted because the previous members had **spent it all. (What does “it” refer to?)**

CLEAR: The club treasury was depleted because the previous members had spent all of the funds.

NOTE: You might be tempted to say that “it” refers to the treasury, but what was spent was the funds or money in the treasury.

Another common error: use of the unidentified “they.” Name names to make it much clearer.

EXAMPLE: They say it might rain tomorrow.

RIGHT: Weather forecasters are predicting rain tomorrow.

QUIZ: Rewrite the sentences to eliminate the ambiguity.

1. **According to the textbook, it says that many of Roosevelt’s policies were failures.**
2. Because the professor is more interested in the environment than in economic development, he sometimes ignores it.

3. Bill and Bob are brothers, but he has always been more sociable.
4. When Catherine dropped the glass on the shelf, it got scratched.
5. Lucy told Marie that her pie was wonderful.

WEEKLY WISDOM

Welcome to this week's grammar lesson. Let me start by revisiting last week's lesson on avoiding ambiguous pronoun use.

QUIZ: Rewrite the sentences to eliminate the ambiguity.

NOTE: There are many ways to rewrite these sentences. Following are some suggestions.

1. According to the textbook, it says that many of Roosevelt's policies were failures.

The textbook says that many of Roosevelt's policies were failures.

2. Because the professor is more interested in the environment than in economic development, he sometimes ignores it.

Because the professor is more interested in the environment than in economic development, he sometimes ignores the economic impact of proposed environmental reforms.

3. Bill and Bob are brothers, but he has always been more sociable.

Bill and Bob are brothers, but Bob has always been more sociable.

4. When Catherine dropped the glass on the shelf, it got scratched.

When Catherine dropped the glass on the shelf, the shelf got scratched.

5. Lucy told Marie that her pie was wonderful.

Lucy told Marie, "Your pie was wonderful!"

Error #3:

Insert missing comma in a compound sentence (i.e., two independent clauses)..

EXAMPLES:

1. John took the train to Miami, **and** while there he went to the Rolling Stones concert.
2. I looked for my friends at the train station, **but** I didn't see them.
3. My friends arrived at the train station a half hour before I did, **so** I missed them.

Notice how the above examples consist of two complete sentences, with the first one followed by a comma and a coordinating conjunction.

The coordinating conjunctions consist of the following (also called the FANBOYS):

For

And

Not

But

Or

Yet

So

Do not separate two independent clauses with only a comma, that's a comma splice.

(The above sentence is grammatically incorrect.)

Now for a quiz to see if you can tell the difference between a comma splice and a correctly punctuated compound sentence. Please indicate in the blank if the sentence is correctly punctuated (C) or incorrect (I).

1. After the sixth inning, I went home, my family stayed. ____
2. Entrepreneurship is the study of small businesses, college students are embracing it enthusiastically. ____

3. **My father is chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, he also heads the Warrant Commission. ____**
4. **All over the country, people sell products over the Internet, and these people are making impressive profits. ____**
5. **One person had been exporting farm equipment, in fact he exports over 30,000 pieces of machinery a year. ____**

Examples adapted from “Avoiding Comma Splices,” an exercise developed by Jim Bobeck, a tutor at Villanova University, available at <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/quizzes/nova/nova4.htm>

WEEKLY WISDOM

Welcome to this week's grammar lesson. Let me start by revisiting last week's quiz on comma splices. Where the sentence is incorrect, I will show you the corrected version.

1. After the sixth inning, I went home, my family stayed. I

After the sixth inning, I went home, **but** my family stayed.

2. Entrepreneurship is the study of small businesses, college students are embracing it enthusiastically. I

Entrepreneurship is the study of small businesses; college students are embracing it enthusiastically.

Another possible correction is to rewrite the sentence so that it is no longer a compound sentence consisting of two independent clauses.

Entrepreneurship is the study of small businesses, **which** college students are embracing ~~it~~ enthusiastically.

3. My father is chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, he also heads the Warren Commission. I

My father is chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, **and** he also heads the Warren Commission.

4. All over the country, people sell products over the Internet, and these people are making impressive profits. C

5. One person had been exporting farm equipment, in fact he exports over 30,000 pieces of machinery a year. I

One person had been exporting farm equipment; in fact, he exports over 30,000 pieces of machinery a year.

And here's a bonus question taken from the text to see if you were really paying attention.

6. Do not separate two independent clauses with only a comma, that's a comma splice. ____

The above sentence is an example of a comma splice – which is a comma error, to be avoided. Replace the comma with a period or semi-colon, or add a connecting word. How about “for”?

This week’s common error is use of the wrong word. Here are some frequent ones:

1. **Irregardless** of the weather, the game will go on.

NOTE: There is no such word in the English language. Use “regardless” instead.

2. Your portion is larger **then** mine.

“Then” means a point in time, next. “Than” is a word of comparison, and the one to use here.

3. I could **of** been a player.

Even though this is phonetically faithful, it is grammatically incorrect. Say “could have” instead.

4. Don’t **loose** your glasses.

“Loose” rhymes with “goose.” If you mean to misplace, lose the second o.

5. We **where** away for the summer. We stayed at my brother’s summer place, **were** we enjoyed fishing and canoeing.

These words are reversed in the above sentences. “Were” (past tense of was) rhymes with her. “Where” (rhymes with swear) refers to a place.

Of course, there are practically endless examples of the wrong word choice. Now, for those of you who knew all the above examples, here is a quiz that is more challenging, involving the correct spelling of irregular plurals that you can take if you wish:

<http://www.quizfreak.com/can-you-identify-the-plural-of-these-14-tough-words/index1.html>

Have fun!

WEEKLY WISDOM

For this week's grammar lesson, I will explain the correct use of commas when using descriptive phrases to modify nouns. Some of these phrases are to be set off by commas, since they add useful but optional information – the sentence could live without it, and it is not essential to be able to identify the person, place, or thing that you are talking about.

EXAMPLES:

Mary Jones, **the student I was telling you about**, is the one with the blue scarf.

Mr. Benskin, **a careful observer**, assigned us to groups that we were best suited for.

Notice how both phrases are surrounded by commas, before and after.

Some phrases, however, are not to be separated by commas, since they are essential to identify who or what you are talking about.

My sister **from Minnesota** is coming to visit me over spring break.

(I have other siblings, but this is the one from Minnesota.)

The cat **in the hat** came back.

The “cat in the hat” is a unified phrase. It’s not the same if you leave it out.

Sometimes the addition of a few words will convert a phrase from one kind to the other. (For the record, the name for these is non-restrictive (with commas) and **restrictive (without commas), but that’s not important** – just learn to recognize when to use commas or not.

A woman **in a red hat** will meet us at the airport.

My mother, **who is wearing a red hat**, will meet us at the airport.

Now that you completely understand this rather tricky distinction, are you ready for a quiz?

1. Only people who speak Russian should apply for the job.
2. Irina who speaks Russian applied for the job.
3. Marco and Guillermo who did not come to class yesterday explained their absence to the instructor.

4. The students who did not come to class yesterday explained their absence to the teacher.
5. The geologist who lectured at Browning Hall last night predicted another earthquake.
6. Dr. Fields who lectured at Browning Hall last night predicted another earthquake.

Source:

https://www.seattlecentral.edu/faculty/dloos/Grammar/adjectiveclauses/adjective_clauses_restrictive-vs-nonrestrictive_exercises.htm

Answers next week. Cheers!

WEEKLY WISDOM

This week's lesson is on wrong verb tense. But first, let's see how well you remember the lesson about commas after a lovely week off. Here are the answers to last week's quiz.

1. Only people who speak Russian should apply for the job. **No commas. The clause "who speak Russian" is necessary to identify the people you are talking about.**
2. Irina, who speaks Russian, applied for the job. **Here you need the commas because the information about Irina is optional. You already know who you are talking about, The information about her speaking Russian is additional information, good to know but not essential.**
3. Marco and Guillermo, who did not come to class yesterday, explained their absence to the instructor. **Commas needed!**
4. The students who did not come to class yesterday explained their absence to the teacher. **This sentence is fine as is. We are talking about a specific group of students—the ones who did not come to class yesterday. The phrase is a unit. Do you see any similarities between this sentence and the next?**
5. The geologist who lectured at Browning Hall last night predicted another earthquake. **If you added commas, take them out. They don't go here.**
6. Dr. Fields, who lectured at Browning Hall last night, predicted another earthquake. **This is a different story. Commas are needed here.**

This week's topic is about using the wrong verb tense. Tense refers to time – past, present, and future. Generally, it's preferable to stick to the same tense throughout the essay. That way your sentences flow better.

To illustrate what I mean, take a look at this paragraph:

Today was the best day of my life! I bought a new car. I was looking forward to this day for a long time. The car that I wanted is waiting for me when I had pulled up. I ran to it, looked inside, and will get a salesman to help me. I was able to drive the car around the neighborhood and I discovered that I had to have it. I

would talk to the salesman and convince him to give me a good price. I am happy as I drive away from the dealership **in my new Corvette.”**

Source: Ryan Thomas, Keeping a Consistent Verb Tense in Writing. Appalachian State University. Web.

Notice how all very confusing this is? The effect is like slipping and sliding across **a floor. It’s hard to get your bearing. Now, let’s pick a timeframe and stick with it.**

Here are my edits:

Today was the best day of my life! I bought a new car. I ~~was~~ had been looking forward to this day for a long time. The car that I wanted ~~is~~ was waiting for me when I ~~had~~ pulled up. I ran to it, looked inside, and ~~will get~~ got a salesman to help me. I was able to drive the car around the neighborhood and I discovered that I had to have it. I ~~would~~ talked to the salesman and convincedd him to give me a good price. I ~~am~~ was happy as I ~~drive~~ drove away from the dealership in my new **Corvette.”**

With one exception, I changed all the verbs to past tense. The exception was the third sentence in line 1: I had been looking forward to this day for a long time.

Why did I slip that **verb phrase “had been looking” in there? I used that phrase to** describe a past action that preceded my trip to the dealership. In other words, everything in the narrative was past, but looking forward to the purchase came first.

Do you agree, the edited paragraph reads much smoother?

Okay, here's another one for practice:

See if you can find and underline the three mistakes in verb tense in the following passage:

An only child, Jaime was a growing nine-year-old boy in my fourth-grade class. At home, his diet consisted of cold cereal and bologna sandwiches. His dad was a single parent who works the second shift in a local factory welding semi trailers. As I was going through the lunch line one day, I noticed Jaime requesting an additional portion of pizza for his school lunch which the cooks deny. When I asked the cooks about it, one of them said, "That kid is always hungry." That settled it. Without his knowing who furnished it, there was an extra lunch for Jaime every day for the rest of the year. I feel good knowing that Jaime wasn't going hungry, even though my meager beginning teacher's salary was barely enough for me to pay my bills and repay my college loans.

WEEKLY WISDOM

This week's lesson is on choosing the correct preposition. But first, let's see how well you did on last week's exercise on verb tenses. Here are the answers to last week's exercise.

An only child, Jaime was a growing nine-year-old boy in my fourth-grade class. At home, his diet consisted of cold cereal and bologna sandwiches. His dad was a single parent who worked **sed** the second shift in a local factory welding semi trailers. As I was going through the lunch line one day, I noticed Jaime requesting an additional portion of pizza for his school lunch which the cooks **denyied**. When I asked the cooks about it, one of them said, "That kid is always hungry." That settled it. Without his knowing who furnished it, there was an extra lunch for Jaime every day for the rest of the year. I **feelfelt** good knowing that Jaime wasn't going hungry, even though my meager beginning teacher's salary was barely enough for me to pay my bills and repay my college loans.

Did you find all three errors?

Now for this week's lesson on prepositions. What is a preposition? It is a word used to introduce a phrase. It can be used to show direction, location, or time, or to introduce an object. The three most common prepositions are in, on, and at. The following examples are adapted from Talkenglish.com:

1. In

Used to denote specific times of a day, month, season, year. **EXAMPLES:**

She always watches the news in the morning.

In the summer, it rains every afternoon for about twenty minutes.

Used to describe a shape, color, or size. EXAMPLES:

This top is available in blue, pink, red, green, and tan.

Let's arrange the desks in a circle.

Used to express an activity taking place while doing something else. EXAMPLE:

In preparing for the final exam, we reviewed the class notes, homework assignments, and videos.

Used to indicate a belief, opinion, or interest. EXAMPLES:

Do you believe in life after death?

Would you be interested in going on a cruise with us?

2. On

Used to indicate a surface where something is placed. EXAMPLE:

I put my glasses on the desk.

Used to specify days and dates, EXAMPLE:

The recycling bins are picked up on Thursdays.

Used to indicate a device in use. EXAMPLES:

She is on the phone right now.

My favorite movie will be on TV tonight.

Used to indicate a part of the body:

He tapped me on my shoulder.

He kissed me on my cheek.

Used to indicate the state of something. EXAMPLES:

Everything in this bin is on sale.

The house is on fire.

NOTE: Do not confuse “in” with “into.” Use “in” to denote location; use “into” to denote motion toward something.

EXAMPLES: Please look into this matter further.

Goldilocks went into the bedroom.

3. At

Used to point out a specific time or place. **EXAMPLES:**

I will meet you at 2:00 o'clock.

There is a concert at the park.

Used to indicate contact information. **EXAMPLES:**

I can be reached at abc@defg.com.

Please call me at (561) 123-4567.

Used to indicate an activity. **EXAMPLE:**

He is good at drawing.

There are many more prepositions, about 150 altogether. Here is a link to a list with examples:

<https://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/prepositions/list.htm>

Here are some special rules to avoid incorrect usage:

1. Don't confuse “of” with “have.”

INCORRECT: I should of known that.

CORRECT: I should have known that.

2. The word “different” is followed by the preposition “from,” not “than.”

INCORRECT: Their curriculum is different than ours.

CORRECT: Their curriculum is different from ours.

Finally, an ending word of wisdom. Have you been taught never to end a sentence with a preposition? While that may be generally good advice, the Oxford Dictionary blog (of all places) lists four examples of when it is permissible, in fact correct, to end a sentence with a preposition, to wit:

- passive structures (*she enjoys being fussed over*)
- relative clauses (*they must be convinced of the commitment that they are taking on*)
- infinitive structures (*Tom had no one to play with*)
- questions beginning with *who, where, what*, etc. (*what music are you interested in?*)

Now, let's test your mastery of prepositions with a quiz:

http://www.grammarbook.com/grammar_quiz/prepositions_1.asp

Grammar Tip #22

This week's lesson is on learning the difference between a plural and a possessive. The possessive form takes an apostrophe.

EXAMPLE: Plural.

The boys are riding their bikes.

EXAMPLE: Possessive.

The boys' bikes are in the back yard.

In the **first example, "boys" is the subject of the sentence. In the second sentence**, the bikes belong to the boys, and the subject of the sentence is bikes.

Forming a possessive is a two-step process. First, identify how many owners there are (one boy or two boys?). If there is only one owner, form the single form of the noun, followed by apostrophe s.

The boy's bike.

If there is more than one owner, form the plural of the word and follow it with an apostrophe.

The boys' bikes.

Note: The object owned does not need to match the owner in number. You can **have one owner and more than one object owned: the boy's bikes, the boys' bike.**

Another note: If the plural form of a word is irregular and doesn't end in s, form the possessive by adding apostrophe s.

The children**en's** toys.

As I'm sure you're aware, there is another use for the apostrophe: to form a **contraction. This paragraph has two examples: I'm (short for I am) and you're (short for you are). Some contractions don't match the words they represent, such as won't for will not, but generally, the apostrophe goes where the missing letter or letters are.**

Similarly, an apostrophe can show the omission of numbers, as in the Roaring **'20s.**

Now, to wind up this column, another use of the apostrophe is to form a plural when the s would otherwise form a different word. Did you get more than one A **on your report card? Then you got A's, not As.**

Here are some links to some online quizzes to reinforce this lesson:

<http://www.softschools.com/quizzes/grammar/apostrophe/quiz602.html>

<http://www.primaryresources.co.uk/online/apostrophes.htm>

Have fun!

WEEKLY WISDOM

This week's lesson is on shifting pronouns. This occurs when you start out by using one pronoun, and then one uses another. (Notice the jarring switch from **“you” to “one”?**) **The trick is to be consistent.**

How do you know when you're shifting from one type of pronoun to another?

There are three categories or points of view used by pronouns:

- First person (the self as speaker): I, we, me, us, my, mine, ours
- Second person (the one being spoke to): you, yours
- Third person (someone else): he, she, it, him, her, his, hers, its, they, their, theirs, them, one

You want to avoid shifts from one person to the other and from singular to plural.

EXAMPLES OF INCORRECT SHIFTS IN PERSON:

1. In *Romeo and Juliet*, we see **one of Shakespeare's most popular** plays, and you soon realize that much of 20th century film is a retelling of that story.
2. Researchers often make great discoveries accidentally, while we are pursuing a different theory altogether.
3. As far as we can tell, a discounted computer could actually be a reconditioned model, and you would never know until it's too late.

A pronoun should also match its antecedent (the noun it refers to) in number.

EXAMPLES OF IMPROPER SHIFTS IN NUMBER:

1. A baseball player leads an exciting life because they get to travel to many interesting cities.
2. When a person coughs or sneezes, they should cover their mouth.

There are two ways to correct this error: make both references singular, or make both references plural. Here is how to correct the above examples:

1. Make both references singular:

A musician leads an exciting life because he or she gets to travel to many interesting cities.

2. Make both references plural:

When individuals cough or sneeze, they should cover their mouth.

NOTE: **To avoid the awkwardness of saying “his or her” all the time, rewrite the sentence to use the plural form of the pronoun.**

EXAMPLE: A team member must pay for his or her own uniform.

REVISED: Team members must pay for their own uniforms.

NOTE: Some pronouns (each, everyone, everybody) are singular in form but plural in meaning. When I use these pronouns I envision a room full of people, but the people are being referred to individually.

EXAMPLE: Everyone on the team is doing his or her part.

INCORRECT: Everyone on the team is doing their part.

NOTE: **Unlike nouns, possessive pronouns (its, ours, theirs) don't take apostrophes.**

Now, to test your mastery of this subject, here's a quiz you can take:

http://highered.mheducation.com/sites/0070958262/student_view0/grammar_review/pronoun_shift.html

WEEKLY WISDOM

This week's lesson is on sentence fragments. Which is an incomplete sentence, just like this one, hence the green underscoring by GrammarCheck. There are many ways a fragment can come about:

1. Missing subject.

EXAMPLE: Went along with it.

2. Incomplete verb.

EXAMPLE: The bookshelf missing a few supports.

NOTE: An “ing” verb alone can never be the main verb in a sentence.

3. A subordinate clause which depends on the main clause for its meaning.

EXAMPLE: Because I was late. [what happened?]

NOTE: A subordinate clause has a subject and a verb, but the addition of an introductory word of dependency makes the entire clause dependent. If you deleted the first word, you would have a stand-alone sentence.

Now, let's correct the above examples:

1. **The teacher** went along with it.
2. The bookshelf **is** missing a few supports.
3. **Because** I was late, or Because I was late, **I missed the opening act.**

NOTE: Has an English teacher ever told you you may not begin a sentence **with the word “Because”?** **Because that's not right; you** can. The second corrected example in number 3 demonstrates this.

In a paragraph, fragments can often be fixed by tacking them on to the previous sentence or following sentence.

EXAMPLE:

Today I took a walk. I wandered through town. Watching the people and cars as they passed. On Congress Street I saw a bus pull up to the curb. An old man stepped out. Wearing a long coat and carrying a cane. He started **walking toward me. Shuffling as he went. His eyes were blue. I don't know** why I noticed him. But there was something about his funny walk and the way he used his cane that caught my attention.

Step 1. Identify the fragments, which I will do by changing the font to red.

Today I took a walk. I wandered through town. **Watching the people and cars as they passed.** On Congress Street I saw a bus pull up to the curb. An old man stepped out. **Wearing a long coat and carrying a cane.** He started walking toward me. **Shuffling as he went. His eyes were blue. I don't know why I noticed him. But there was something about his funny walk and the way he used his cane that** caught my attention.

NOTE: The last sentence is not a fragment, but the second half of a compound sentence. It should be connected to the previous sentence with a comma.

Step 2. Fix the fragments, which I will do by changing the corrected text to green.

Today I took a walk. I wandered through town, **watching the people and cars as they passed.** On Congress Street I saw a bus pull up to the curb. An old man stepped out, **wearing a long coat and carrying a cane.** He started walking toward me, **shuffling as he went. His eyes were blue. I don't know why I noticed him, but there was something about his funny walk and the way he used his cane that** caught my attention.

Source: Sentence Fragments: A Skill Sheet. WriteGuid.com, n.d. Web. 6 April 2015.

It's a good idea to review the lesson and have fun by taking a quiz. Here we go!

http://www.softschools.com/quizzes/language_arts/complete_sentence_or_fragment/quiz1524.html

WEEKLY WISDOM

This week's lesson is on subject-verb agreement. Short, simple sentences are easy to do, but when you have more than one subject, or phrases separating the subject and the verb, it gets complicated.

The basic rule is simple: singular subjects take singular verbs, and plural subjects take plural verbs.

EXAMPLE (singular subject/verb): My cat is white.

EXAMPLE (plural subject/verb): My cats are white.

Note that a single verb and a plural subject both end in "s." (Usually; irregular plurals might not end in s).

Now, let's see what happens when we add a prepositional phrase that comes between the subject and the verb.

The **player** with the most points **wins**.

The **soldiers** without fear **are** inspiring.

The prepositional phrases end in a noun, followed by the main verb of the sentence (points wins and fear are), but the word that determines the proper verb ending is the subject, shown in red.

The next tricky situation is when you have a compound subject, which makes it plural.

EXAMPLE (singular): **Tom** is going to the party.

EXAMPLE (plural): **Tom and Nancy** are going to the party.

EXAMPLE (plural): **Both** of them are going to the party.

Now, here's the tricky part. What if you added another person by way of prepositional phrase? Use the rule of prepositional phrases and ignore the phrase for purposes of determining what the correct verb should be.

EXAMPLE: **Tom** as well as Nancy is going to the party.

Another tricky area: subjects preceded by either or/neither nor. The verb can be either singular or plural, depending on the noun preceding the verb.

EXAMPLE (both nouns singular; verb is singular): Either mom or **dad is coming**.

EXAMPLE (both nouns plural; verb is plural): Either the students or the **teachers are coming**.

EXAMPLE (the verb follows the noun closest to it): Either the coach or the **students are coming**.

EXAMPLE: Either the students or the **coach is coming**.

Ready for more tricks and tips? There are some tricky pronouns that seem plural **but are singular: “each” and “every.” The following sentences** conjure up images of a roomful of people, but the verb is singular.

EXAMPLE: **Each** of us **is** responsible for our expenses.

EXAMPLE: **Everyone is** waiting.

EXAMPLE: **Everybody is** here.

The phrase “one of those who” takes a plural verb. The idea is that there are others as well.

She is **one** of those people who never **forget** a name.

However, if she is the only one, then you need a singular verb.

EXAMPLE: She is the only **one** who never **forgets** a name.

Then there are indefinite pronouns that take a singular or plural verb, depending on context.

EXAMPLE: **Some** of us **are** coming.

EXAMPLE: **Some** of the pie **is** missing.

There are also certain words that are plural in form (end in s), but are singular in meaning.

EXAMPLE: **Economics is** a required subject for business majors.

EXAMPLE: **Five dollars is** a lot of money to pay for a cup of coffee.

Finally, please note that when a sentence begins with “here” or “there,” it can be followed by “is” or “are,” depending on the subject that follows the verb.

EXAMPLE: There **is** my **friend**.

EXAMPLE: Here **are** the **answers**.

Let’s wrap up this rather tricky lesson with a quiz.

<http://www.cityu.edu.hk/elc/quiz/subverb1.htm>

WEEKLY WISDOM #26

It's near the end of the semester, and I haven't tackled all 20 items in the list of the 20 most common grammar errors that college students make, so I will combine a few short and simple rules:

1. Commas in a series (of three or more items)

Although there is some disagreement among grammarians, the majority rule is that a comma is needed after each item except the last. This is called an Oxford comma.

EXAMPLE: We are bringing chips, dips, plates, and napkins.

Napkins is the last item in the series, so the last comma is placed after the next to last item, plates.

But be careful! Some items are a matched pair and are listed as a single **item, separated by "and": peanut butter and jelly, ham and eggs, Heckle and Jeckle.**

EXAMPLE: The breakfast menu offers pancakes, ham and eggs, omelettes, and French toast.

Sometimes the list will include items which have their own commas: Hartford, Connecticut; Boston, Massachusetts; and San Francisco, California.

In this case, separate items in the series by a semi-colon. The above example lists three cities along with their states.

2. **The other quick item is learning when to use "it" and "it's." Most English language users don't know the difference, but it's easy and it's foolproof.**

If you want to use "it's" as a shortcut for "it is," use the contraction form: "it's."

EXAMPLE: It's raining.

Otherwise, use no apostrophe.

EXAMPLE: The club announced its election results.

Notice that we are talking about one company, announcing its election results, not theirs.

The beauty of this rule is that (unlike just about every other rule in the English language), there are NO EXCEPTIONS.

Now for a few easy quizzes to nail this lesson down solid.

Commas in a series:

<http://www.proprofs.com/quiz-school/story.php?title=Lists-Series-Commas-1>

Its/It's:

http://www.softschools.com/quizzes/grammar/words_its_its/quiz2490.html

WEEKLY WISDOM #27

Last week of classes and the final words of wisdom! This week I will write about misplaced or dangling modifiers, which means a modifying word or phrase is in the wrong place, changing or obscuring your meaning.

Here are some humorous examples from a website by Eddie Snipes.

EXAMPLE: We saw several monkeys on vacation in Mexico.

(The monkeys were on vacation!)

REVISED: We saw several monkeys while we were on vacation in Mexico.

EXAMPLE: The library has several books about dinosaurs in our school.

(Your school has dinosaurs walking around!)

REVISED: Our school library has several books about dinosaurs.

EXAMPLE: I glimpsed a rat sorting the recyclable materials.

(The rat is going green!)

REVISED: While I was sorting the recyclable materials, I glimpsed a rat.

EXAMPLE: While doing the dishes, a mouse ran across the floor.

(The mouse was doing the dishes!)

REVISED: While I was doing the dishes, I saw a mouse run across the floor.

Now for an example of how the misplacement of a single word can change the meaning of the sentence. The examples below are taken from a website by Stacie Heaps:

Only he talks to me. (He is the only one who talks to me.)

He only talks to me. (He only talks to me. He doesn't do anything else.)

He talks only to me. (He doesn't talk to anyone else.)

Now for the related error, dangling modifiers. Dangling modifiers are a stray phrase in search of something to hang its hat on. Here is a humorous example from Constance Hale, author of a column I came across called “Sin & Syntax.”

“Hopping from foot to foot, the crosstown bus came into view.”

(Uptown, downtown, or crosstown, what bus needs wheels when it’s got feet?)

The way the sentence is written, the crosstown bus is hopping. The real hopper has managed to disappear from the sentence! Let’s try to rewrite it. This time merely rearranging the words on the page will not be enough.

REVISED: While John was hopping from foot to foot, he saw the crosstown bus come into view.”

Remember, when you introduce a sentence with a participle phrase based on a verb, the next noun or pronoun should be the person or thing doing the activity.

EXAMPLE: Slipping and sliding across the pond, Adrianna enjoyed her first attempt at ice skating in her boots.

Learn to analyze your sentences for proper placement of modifiers, placing them as closely as possible to the word they modify and the meaning of your sentence will be clear.

Now for a quiz to see how well you have learned this week’s lesson. It comes from one of my favorite grammarians, Big Dog. Good luck!

http://aliscot.com/bigdog/dmmm_exercise.htm

Works Cited

Heaps, Stacie. **“Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers.”** *WriteExpress Corporation*,

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