

A Review of Common Editing Mistakes & A Review of Basic Comma Rules

Sentence Formation Errors Reviewed and Practiced

Fragment: is any construction that does not constitute a complete thought, but it is punctuated as a sentence.

After we returned home.	
Because the storm ended without incident.	

Fused Sentences – Run-on and Comma Splice: An error in this area results when two or more independent clauses are joined together without appropriate connecting words or internal punctuation.

He went home they went to school.	
The book is long, the movie is short.	
He went home They went to school.	
He went home: she went to school.	

Misplaced or Dangling Modifier: An error in this area results when a modifier is not clearly placed or is not logically placed. Ambiguity is often the result.

After eating lunch, the train left the station.	
A house is for sale by owner with a bay window.	

Usage Errors Reviewed and Practiced

Subject – Verb Agreement: A verb must agree in number with its subject. An error results when a singular subject/verb is used incorrectly with a plural subject/verb.

Everyone, no matter how many obstacles occur, want to succeed.	
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Tense: Tense indicates time. An error results when an incorrect tense is used or when there is an inappropriate shift in tense

He was a good man. He is considered to be intelligent and attractive. He was outstanding as a father.	
Twenty years ago, he is less well known.	

Pronoun – Antecedent Agreement: An antecedent is the noun or pronoun to which the pronoun refers. The pronoun must agree with its antecedent in person, number, and gender.

John gave my approval. (person)	
Someone gave their approval. (number)	
Mary gave his approval. (gender)	

Pronoun Reference: Indefinite reference occurs when the antecedent of the pronoun is vague, indefinite, or ambiguous.

At school they expect students to attend class regularly.	
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Case of Pronouns: A pronoun is either *subjective* (as subject), *possessive* (indicates ownership), or *objective* case (as object). Inappropriate use of case is often seen in confusion of subjective and objective forms, misuse of reflexive (names a receiver)/intensive forms (emphasizes a noun or pronoun), use of incorrect case preceding gerunds (pronouns should appear in the possessive case in this instance), and incorrect formation of the reflexive (hissself, theirselves).

Subjective	Objective	Possessive
I	Me	My
We	Us	Our
You	You	Your
He/she/it	Him/her/it	His/her/its
They	They	Their

Sandra confessed the artist was her.	
John and myself went to town	
The chances of you being hit by lightning are about two million to one.	
He called Mary hisself.	

Apostrophes: Frequent mistakes are omission of apostrophes in possessives and contractions, incorrect possessive forms, and superfluous apostrophes.

We can help the one's in prison.	
Its a hot and sticky day.	

Mechanics Reviewed

Capitalization: Failure to capitalize the first word in a sentence, proper nouns, the personal pronoun "I," or the use of superfluous capitalization are major errors.

Ex. George eats Bananas and Oranges every day.

End Punctuation: Common errors include omission or improper placement of end punctuation, use of periods following interrogative sentences, omission of periods following abbreviations, etc.

Ex. Why did she swallow the fly.

Comma Usage: See the exercises and detailed descriptions on the following pages.

Semi-colon: Common errors include use of semi-colons separating unrelated ideas and substituting semi-colons for commas.

Ex. I am going to the beach; pizza is my favorite food.

Quotation Marks: Common errors include omitting the beginning or ending quotation mark, placing the end punctuation outside of the quotation marks, not placing a comma between the words of the speaker and the quotation, and not capitalizing the beginning word of the quotation. See the exercises and detailed descriptions on the following pages.

Miscellaneous Usage Problems: Other problems in usage considered to be major are the use of double negatives, confusion of comparative and superlative degrees, confusion of word groups (adjective with adverb, singular with plural), inappropriate homophone usage, and inappropriate use of numerical notations.

Ex. He didn't do nothing to accomplish the task. (double negative)

Ex. She is the tallest of the two sisters. (incorrect use of superlative)

Ex. She is real beautiful. (confused use of modifier)

Ex. This town has less people. (confusing use of comparison)

Ex. Their going to town. (homophone confusion)

Ex. He was to tired to help his mother. (homophone confusion)

TEN BASIC COMMA RULES (Adapted from A Writer's Reference, 3rd edition, by Diana Hacker)

The comma was invented to help readers navigate more efficiently through the thoughts of the writer. Without it sentence parts can collide into one another unexpectedly, causing misreadings.

Confusing: If you cook Elmer will do the dishes.

Confusing: While we were eating a rattlesnake approached our campsite.

It is clear where the commas should be added to make the sentence clear; however, it is misleading to suggest that commas can be placed haphazardly at the discretion of the writer. To make things easier for both writers and readers, certain rules have been established to make the whole process consistent.

A comma is needed before a coordinating conjunction joining two independent clauses.

Nearly everyone has heard of love at first sight, but I fell in love at first dance.

A comma is needed after an introductory word group.

When Irwin was ready to eat, his cat jumped onto the table.

Knowing that he couldn't outrun a car, Kevin took to the fields.

A comma is needed between items in a series.

For breakfast the children ordered cornflakes, English muffins with peanut butter, and cherry Cokes.

My uncle willed me all of his property, houses, and warehouses.

A comma is needed between coordinate adjectives not joined by and. Do not use a comma between cumulative adjectives.

When two or more adjectives modify a noun separately, they are coordinate; in other words, these adjectives work together to modify the noun, could be switched around in any order, and the sentence would still have the same meaning.

Mother has become a strong, confident, independent woman.

Michael is a warm, gentle, affectionate father.

When two or more adjectives are grouped together, but they modify the noun separately, they are cumulative; in other words, these adjectives are working separately to modify the noun, and their order cannot be altered or the meaning of the sentence would be altered.

Three large gray shapes moved slowly toward us.

Ira ordered a rich chocolate layer cake.

A comma is needed to set off nonrestrictive elements. Do not use a comma to set off restrictive elements.

A nonrestrictive element is a part of a sentence, usually a modifying phrase, which could be removed from the sentence. This kind of phrase is not essential to the meaning of the sentence. However, if you determine that a phrase is essential to the meaning of the sentence, it is called restrictive and commas must be avoided with this type of phrase.

Adjective Clauses – always begin with *who*, *whom*, *whose*, *which*, or *that*

Ed's beach house, which is located on right on the ocean, was hit hard by the hurricane.

Phrases functioning as adjectives – these phrases can be prepositional or verbal phrases

The helicopter, with its 100,000-candlepower spotlight illuminating the area, circled above.

Appositives – a noun or phrase the renames a nearby noun

Harper Lee's only novel, To Kill a Mockingbird, won many awards.

A comma is needed to set off transitional and parenthetical expressions, absolute phrases, and contrasted elements.

Transitional expressions – serve as bridges between sentences or parts of a sentence

Minh did not understand our language; moreover, he was unfamiliar with our customs.

Natural foods are not always salt free; for example, celery contains more sodium than most people would imagine.

Parenthetical expressions – phrases that could be placed in parentheses

Evolution, so far as we know, doesn't work this way.

The bluefish weighed about twelve pounds, give or take a few ounces.

Absolute phrases – phrases that modify a whole sentence

His tennis game at last perfected, Chris won the cup.

Brenda was forced to rely on public transportation, her car having been wrecked the week before.

Contrasted Elements – phrases that usually begin with sharply contrasting words like not and unlike

Now that I am married, my mother talks to me as an adult, not as her daughter.

A comma is needed to set off nouns of direct address, the words yes or no, interrogative tags, and mild interjections.

Forgive us, Dr. Spock, for spanking Brian.

Yes, the loan will probably be approved.

Well, cases like these are difficult to decide.

A comma is needed with tag expressions to set off direct quotations.

“Convictions are more dangerous foes of truth than lies,” wrote philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

A comma is needed with dates, addresses, titles, and numbers.

On December 12, 1890, orders were sent out for the arrest of Sitting Bull.

Sandra Barnes, M.D., performed the surgery

A comma is needed to help the reader avoid confusion.

To err is human; to forgive, divine.

All of the catastrophes that we had feared might happen, happened.

COMMON COMMA ERRORS - Explained

Avoid using a comma to break up compound elements that are not independent clauses.

Male supremacy was assumed by my father, and accepted by my mother.

Jake still does not realize that his illness is serious, and that he will have to alter his diet to improve.

Avoid using a comma to separate a verb from a subject or object.

Zoos large enough to give the animals freedom to roam, are becoming more popular.

Captain Spurlack observed, that repeat offenders commit the vast majority of crimes in our city.

Avoid using a comma before the first or after the last item in a series.

Other causes of asthmatic attacks are, stress, change in temperature, humidity, and cold air.

Ironically, this job that appears so glamorous, carefree, and easy, carries a high degree of responsibility.

Avoid using a comma to set off restrictive or mildly parenthetical elements.

Drivers, who think they own the road, make cycling a dangerous sport.

As long as patients are treated in a professional yet compassionate manner, most, eventually, learn to deal with their illness.

Avoid using a comma to set off an essential adverbial phrase at the end of a sentence.

Don't visit Paris at the height of the tourist season, unless you have booked hotel reservations.

Avoid using a comma after a coordinating conjunction.

Occasionally soap operas are performed live, but, more often they are taped.

Avoid using a comma after the words such or like.

Many shade-loving plants, such as, begonias, impatiens, and coleus, can add color to a shady garden.

Avoid using a comma before than.

Touring Crete was more thrilling for us, than visiting the Greek islands frequented by the jet set.

Avoid using a comma after although.

Although, the air was balmy, the water was too cold for swimming.

Avoid using a comma before a parenthesis.

At MCI Sylvia began at the bottom, (with only three and a half walls and a swivel chair), but within five years she had been promoted to supervisor.

Avoid using a comma with a question mark or exclamation point.

“Why don’t you try it?,” she coaxed.

QUOTATION ACTIVITY & PRACTICE

When you quote from an original text, there are many ways you can introduce and structure the sentence that contains the quoted passage.

1. *The most common way to integrate quoted material into your writing is by presenting a...*

Signal Phrase (Hint: Speaker & Context) followed by “Quoted Material” (page # if provided).

Look for an example of this type of quote structure in your sample student essay and copy it in the space below.

Ultimately Terrace concluded that in many cases “the teacher’s signs had prompted Nim’s signs” (75).

1.

2. *Another common way to integrate quoted material into your writing is by presenting a...*

Signal Phrase, “followed by quoted material,” followed by a connecting phrase, “and then finished off with quoted material” (Author’s name is added to page # because the name isn’t noted in the signal phrase).

Look for an example of this type of quote structure in your sample student essay and copy it in the space below.

Koko has signed “finger bracelet” to describe a ring and “bottle match” for a cigarette lighter (Patterson and Linden 146).

2.

3. *Another, less common way to integrate quoted material into your writing is by presenting ...*

“Quoted material,” interrupted by a signal phrase, “then finished with the rest of the quoted material” (page #).

Look for an example of this type of quote structure in your sample student essay and copy it in the space below.

“Even more intriguing,” write Patterson and Linden, “is his variation of the tickle sign depending on whom he is conversing with” (176).

3.

4. *Another, less common way to integrate quoted material into your writing is by presenting ...*

“Quoted material,” followed by the signal phrase (page #).

Look for an example of this type of quote structure in your sample student essay and copy it in the space below.

“The teacher’s signs had prompted Nim’s signs,” according to Terrace’s conclusions (75).

4.