

# **Common Errors in Writing**

Md. Mojibur Rahman  
[mrahmanelt@iitism.ac.in](mailto:mrahmanelt@iitism.ac.in)

# Sentence Fragments

- A sentence fragment comprises an incomplete thought. Usually, they lack either a subject or a predicate.

The old rocking chair wobbled and creaked. Making the woman's grandson wonder if it was stable.

- In this example, one thought is broken into two pieces so that only one of the pieces can stand as its own thought. The second sentence does not have a subject. Complete the sentence to fix the fragment.

The old rocking chair wobbled and creaked, making the woman's grandson wonder if it was stable.

# Run-on Sentences

- Run-on sentences do just the opposite—they combine too many thoughts, one after another.

My favorite book is *The Fellowship of the Ring* and Legolas is the best character ever.

- In this sentence, there are two thoughts: what the speaker's favorite book is and who his/her favorite character is. However, these thoughts are connected with only a conjunction. To fix this, separate the thoughts with 1) a comma/coordinating conjunction combination, 2) a semicolon, or 3) a period.

- 1) My favorite book is *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and Legolas is the best character ever.
- 2) My favorite book is *The Fellowship of the Ring*; Legolas is the best character ever.
- 3) My favorite book is *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Legolas is the best character ever.

# Sentence Sprawl

- Too many equally weighted phrases and clauses produce tiresome sentences.

*The hearing was planned for Monday, December 2, but not all of the witnesses could be available, so it was rescheduled for the following Friday, and then all the witnesses could attend.*

- There are no grammatical errors here, but the sprawling sentence does not communicate clearly and concisely.

*The hearing, which had been planned for Monday, December 2, was rescheduled for the following Friday so that all witnesses would be able to attend.*

# Faulty Sentence Structure

- If a sentence starts out with one kind of structure and then changes to another kind, it will confuse readers.

*The information that families have access to is what financial aid is available and thinking about the classes available, and how to register.*

- Maintain the grammatical pattern within a sentence. Each sentence must have a subject and a verb, and the subjects and predicates must make sense together.

*Families have access to information about financial aid, class availability, and registration.*

# Unnecessary Shift in Verb Tense

- Verbs that shift from one tense to another with no clear reason can confuse readers.

*Example: Martin **searched** for a great horned owl. He **takes** photographs of all the birds he **sights**.*

# Present/Past Tense

- Most academic writing is done in the present tense. Watch out for accidental slips into past tense, especially when discussing other writings.

Instead of: C. S. Lewis's character Susan was not able to stay in Narnia because she represented those who fall away from belief in Christ.

Try: C. S. Lewis's character Susan is not able to stay in Narnia because she represents those who fall away from belief in Christ.

# Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

- Place modifiers near the words they describe; be sure the modified words actually appear in the sentence.
- Too many equally weighted phrases and clauses produce tiresome sentences.

*When writing a proposal, an original task is set for research.*

*When writing a proposal, a scholar sets an original task for research.*

*Many tourists visit Arlington National Cemetery, where veterans and military personnel are buried every day from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m.*

*Every day from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., many tourists visit Arlington National Cemetery, where veterans and military personnel are buried.*

# Squinting Modifiers

- A squinting modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that could modify the word before it or the word after it.

Students who study rarely get bad grades.

- *Solution:* Put the modifier next to the word it should modify.

Students who rarely study get bad grades.

OR

Students who study get bad grades rarely .

# Faulty Parallelism

- Be sure you use grammatically equal sentence elements to express two or more matching ideas or items in a series.

*The candidate's goals include winning the election, a national health program, and the educational system.*

*The candidate's goals include winning the election, enacting a national health program, and improving the educational system.*

*Some critics are not so much opposed to capital punishment as postponing it for so long.*

*Some critics are not so much opposed to capital punishment as they are to postponing it for so long.*

# Subject/Verb Agreement

- Subjects and verbs must agree in number. Singular subjects require singular verbs, and plural subjects require plural verbs.

Whataburger is a wonderful fast food restaurant.

Swans are dangerous birds when threatened.

# Pronoun/Antecedent Agreement

- The standards of the Modern Language Association (MLA) require pronoun/antecedent agreement. It is imperative to ensure that pronouns and their antecedents, the nouns which are replaced by pronouns, agree.

Billy reluctantly told his mom about the incident with the cat and the vacuum.

- In the example, the word “his” refers to Billy. Therefore, “Billy” is the antecedent of the pronoun “his.”

# Unclear Pronoun Reference

- All pronouns must clearly refer to definite referents [nouns]. Use **it**, **they**, **this**, **that**, **these**, **those**, and **which** carefully to prevent confusion.

**Unclear:** *Einstein was a brilliant mathematician. This is how he was able to explain the universe.*

**Clear:** *Einstein, who was a brilliant mathematician, used his ability with numbers to explain the universe.*

- **Unclear:** *Because Senator Martin is less interested in the environment than in economic development, he sometimes neglects it.*
- **Clear:** *Because of his interest in economic development, Senator Martin sometimes neglects the environment.*

# Incorrect Pronoun Case

- Determine whether the pronoun is being used as a subject, or an object, or a possessive in the sentence, and select the pronoun form to match.

**Incorrect:** *Castro's communist principles inevitably led to an ideological conflict between he and President Kennedy.*

**Correct:** *Castro's communist principles inevitably led to an ideological conflict between him and President Kennedy.*

**Incorrect:** *Because strict constructionists recommend fidelity to the Constitution as written, no one objects more than them to judicial reinterpretation.*

**Correct:** *Because strict constructionists recommend fidelity to the Constitution as written, no one objects more than they [do] to judicial reinterpretation.*

# Omitted Commas

- Use commas to signal non-restrictive or nonessential material, to prevent confusion, and to indicate relationships among ideas and sentence parts.

**Incorrect:** *When it comes to eating people differ in their tastes.*

**Correct:** *When it comes to eating, people differ in their tastes.*

**Incorrect:** *The Huns who were Mongolian invaded Gaul in 451.*

**Correct:** *The Huns, who were Mongolian, invaded Gaul in 451.*

# Superfluous Commas

- Unnecessary commas make sentences difficult to read.

**Unclear:** *Field trips are required, in several courses, such as, botany and geology.*

**Clear:** *Field trips are required in several courses, such as botany and geology.*

**Unclear:** *The term, “scientific illiteracy,” has become almost a cliche, in educational circles.*

**Clear:** *The term “scientific illiteracy” has become almost a cliche in educational circles.*

# Comma Splices

- Comma splices are similar. They combine too many thoughts with only a comma.

The dog ran away, he simply could not stand the food anymore.

There are two separate thoughts in this sentence, but it is unclear how the thoughts are related. Use a stronger connection like those above to demonstrate the relationship between the thoughts:

The dog ran away; he simply could not stand the food anymore.

# No comma after an introductory phrase

- An introductory phrase provides some background information and is usually followed by a comma. The comma is optional when the phrase is very short.

While a Thanksgiving commercial played on the TV she was at the library trying to study for her final exams.

While a Thanksgiving commercial played on the TV, she was at the library trying to study for her final exams.

At long last I made it home.

OR

At long last, I made it home.

# Comma misuse (inside a compound subject)

- A compound subject uses a conjunction to connect more than one noun phrase.

My roommate, and his brother, went to see a movie.

My roommate and his brother went to see a movie.

# No commas around interrupters

- Interrupters are phrases that break the flow of a sentence to provide additional detail. Put commas around interrupters.

It was unfortunately the end of winter vacation.

It was, unfortunately, the end of winter vacation.

# Apostrophe Errors

- Apostrophes indicate possession for nouns (“Jim’s hat,” “several years’ work”) but not for personal pronouns (**its, your, their, and whose**).
- Apostrophes also indicate omissions in contractions (“it’s” = “it is”).
- In general, they are not used to indicate plurals.

**Incorrect:** *In the current conflict its uncertain who's borders their contesting.*

**Correct:** *In the current conflict it is [it's] uncertain whose borders they are [they're] contesting.*

**Incorrect:** *The Aztecs ritual's of renewal increased in frequency over the course of time.*

**Correct:** *The Aztecs' rituals of renewal increased in frequency over the course of time.*

# Apostrophes and Contractions

- Apostrophes are used in two ways: to indicate possession and to create contractions, or combinations of two or more words into one. The first case is acceptable in academic writing; it simply requires “’s” or “’s” at the end of the noun which claims the object.

The executive picked his mother’s Bible from the shelf and, to his partners’ amazement, he began to read to them.

- There are a couple of important exceptions to the “’s” rule. While plural objects that end with an “s” do not need another “s” after the apostrophe, the names of Biblical figures Jesus and Moses are the only singular objects that follow this rule.

Jesus’ message was well-received by the public, much to the Pharisees’ dismay.

- Contractions should never be used in academic writing. Split contractions into their individual words to maintain both meaning and academic voice.

Contraction	Words	Example
Don't	Do not	Do not be afraid.
Can't	Cannot	He or she cannot give up.
Won't	Will not	The dog will not listen.
He's/she's	He is/she is	He or she is responsible.

# First/Second Person Vs. Third Person

- Scholarly writing usually uses third person pronouns to maintain an objective voice.
- Instead of:

My friends and I believe that putting fruit in a cake should not be allowed. (First person)  
Eating too much cake will give you a stomachache. (Second person)

- Try:

Some people believe that putting fruit in a cake should not be allowed. (Third person)  
Eating too much cake will give the consumer a stomachache. (Third person)

- Beware of imperative sentences, or sentences that give a command to an unspecified person.

(You) Consider the consequences of skipping class beforehand.

- These sentences have an understood “you,” which is second person, and can come off as instructional or even preachy.

It is important for the student to consider the consequences of skipping class.

# Words Easily Confused

- “Effect” is most often a noun (the effect), and “affect” is almost always a verb.
- Other pairs commonly confused: “lead”/“led” and “accept”/“except.”
- Check a glossary of usage to find the right choice.
- **Incorrect:** *The recession had a negative affect on sales.*
- **Correct:** *The recession had a negative effect on sales.*  
*(or) The recession affected sales negatively.*
- **Incorrect:** *The laboratory instructor chose not to offer detailed advise.*
- **Correct:** *The laboratory instructor chose not to offer detailed advice.*

# Wordiness

- No matter the word count required for an assignment, needlessly fancy language in a paper will only confuse the reader. The use of passive voice and empty phrases like “In fact” are common culprits of wordiness.

As a matter of fact, studies have been conducted which give scientists reason to believe that when scared and hapless homeowners, when their homes are broken into by a bear, strike the invasive creature’s nose, the beast will surely leave.

- Use as few words as necessary to make the point clear.

Studies have shown that when victims of bear break-ins hit the bear in the nose, the bear will leave.

- Using too many conjugations of the verb “to be” can also be wordy.

There are people everywhere, and there seems to be a strange scent lingering in the air.

- Use action verbs instead of linking verbs as much as possible to eliminate overuse of the “to be” conjugations.

People are everywhere, and a strange scent lingers in the air.

# Research Papers Writing

- Thesis Statement
- Quotation Marks and Punctuation
- Integrating Quotes
- Extra Spaces Between Paragraphs

# Thesis Statement

- It is easy to mistake an attention-grabbing sentence for a thesis statement. A thesis statement carefully encompasses all the main points of an essay in the last sentence of the introduction. Except in the case of a biographical essay, every academic paper needs a strong thesis statement.

Not only are strawberry cereal bars more popular than other flavors, but they also contain a higher fruit percentage and are scientifically proven to make the consumer's day better.

# Quotation Marks and Punctuation

- In sentences involving the titles of short works like articles or poems, punctuation always goes inside the quotation marks.

In the article, “Bacon: Healthier Than You Thought,” the author scientifically investigates the health benefits of this popular breakfast food.

“Get Me Out of Here!,”\* a poem written by a comedian, describes the uncomfortable nature of holiday gatherings where family members are on unfavorable terms with each other.

# Integrating Quotes

- Most academic papers require the use of quotes from external sources, but it can be tricky to incorporate quotes properly. Here are a few tips for proper quote integration.

Parenthetical (MLA): A. U. Thor, in his groundbreaking work *A Book About Writing*, says that “The beauty of a work is in the eye of the author” (45). This is one reason why a writer should never let others’ harsh words upset them.

Footnote (Turabian): A. U. Thor, in his groundbreaking work *A Book About Writing*, says that “The beauty of a work is in the eye of the author.”<sup>1</sup> This is one reason why a writer should never let others’ harsh words upset them.

- Introduce the author of the quote or paraphrase before using it. In the example sentence, the author names the author and the work discussed and even offers a reason why this particular work is a good one to cite.

A. U. Thor, in his groundbreaking work *A Book About Writing*, says that...

- Always use quotation marks around direct quotes, which are the exact words of the author. No quotation marks are needed when paraphrasing, or saying the same thing in the writer's own words, but these quotes still follow all other rules of quotation.

“The beauty of a work is in the eye of the author”

- When using parenthetical in-text citations, such as in MLA format, punctuation usually comes after the parenthesis at the end of a sentence. The following example is in MLA format, but APA format works the same way.

A. U. Thor, in his groundbreaking... says that “The beauty of a work is in the eye of the author” (45).

- When using footnotes, such as in Turabian format, sentence-ending punctuation comes before the superscript number.

A. U. Thor, in his groundbreaking... says that “The beauty of a work is in the eye of the author.”<sup>1</sup>

- Make sure to explain the quote after it is used. Connect the quote to the topic of the paragraph. In other words, explain why the quote is necessary to make a point.

This is one reason why a writer should never let others' harsh words upset them.

# Extra Spaces Between Paragraphs

- Microsoft Word automatically inserts an extra space between paragraphs, but most professors prefer that space to be removed. Eliminate it before beginning to write with the following steps: Under the Home tab, in the Styles selection box, select the style labeled No Spacing. In the Paragraph box, click the little arrow in the bottom right corner to pull up the Paragraph formatting box. Click on the dropdown menu under “Single” and select “Double” to ensure double-spacing, then click to checkmark the box that says “Don’t add space between paragraphs of the same style.” Hit OK. The extra space between paragraphs should disappear, and the paper should be ready to go.
- If the paper has already been written, go up to the far right of the Home tab, click on the Select dropdown menu, and click “Select All.” Then, follow the same steps as above. This will undo any centering and other special formatting already done, so it is best to start from scratch.

# Cutting Clutter

# Cut Clutter from Writing

- We often take too long to say too little. Writing clearly and cleanly takes work, but it's vital. When we write simply, we know what we've said, and we know other people will understand it.
- Clutter is words, phrase, or sentences that take up space, and they contribute little to the message.
- Clutter may also be commonly referred to as wordiness or conciseness.
- It's a common problem for any one who writes but one that's easily solved by learning to recognize the most common symptoms of clutter.

# Don't Draw Excessive Attention to the Writer

- Using expressions like -

I noticed...

I spotted...

I saw...

I observed...

I could see...

An old man in a tattered coat leaning into the wind

- Takes the reader's attention away from what should be most important - the old man - and puts it on the narrator or the writer.
- When you say something about the old man, you simply imply you 'noticed,' 'spotted,' 'saw,' 'observed,' or 'could see' him since there is no other way you could know those things about him. Since the 'seeing' announcement is unnecessary, simply revise the sentence.

**An old man in a tattered coat leaned into the wind**

# **Don't use Verbs that require helping verbs if a simpler form will do**

- Be specially cautious of forms of 'be' and 'would' when they precede an action verb.

Instead: The cooks were preparing pea soup last night.

Say: The cooks prepared pea soup last night.

Instead: Sara would take all the criticism.

Say: Sara took all the criticism.

Instead: I will have eaten the chips before the game.

Say: I will eat the chips before the game.

# Never start an independent clause with the word “There”

- Action verbs create better visuals, and the “there” construction is more wordy.

Instead: **There was a rhinoceros charging across the road.**

Say: **A rhinoceros charged across the road.**

# Never start an independent clause with the word “It”

Instead: It was a cold night when the cows broke out.

Say: On a cold night the cows broke out.

Instead: It's too bad they lost the game.

Say: Unfortunately, they lost the game.

Instead: It seemed Grandma was prepared for the worst.

Say: Grandma was prepared for the worst.

**Don't use two or more action verbs when only one is needed to make the meaning clear.**

Instead: Nate began to cry when his dog died.

Say: Nate cried when his dog died.

# Cut the adverb implied in the verb

Instead: She sprinted rapidly after the bus.

Say: She sprinted after the bus.

Instead: Grandpa stumbled clumsily over the cat.

Say: Grandpa stumbled over the cat.

Instead: Mary cried sadly because Bambi's mother died.

Say: Mary cried because Bambi's mother died.

# Use the short words rather than the long one *when they mean the same thing.*

Instead of	Say
Nemrous	Many
Facilitate	Ease
Remainder	Rest
Initial	First
Sufficient	Enough
Attempt	Try

# Always be cautious of “that”

Instead: He thought that he was late.

Say: He thought he was late.

Instead: I am certain that he went home.

Say: I am certain he went home.

# Use the active voice—put the actor in the sentence

Instead: It was decided that the committee would meet tonight.

Say: The committee will meet tonight.

Instead: The porch was swept by Kate.

Say: Kate swept the porch.

# Don't use phrases that add words, not meaning.

Instead of	Say
Due to the fact that	Because
In the event that	If
With the possible exception of	Except
At the present time	Now
The reason why he went to the store because	He went to the store because

# Avoid general adjectives or adverbs

- These words don't tell the reader anything important—they just take up space: kind of, sort of, individual, specific, definitely, actually, generally, really, basically, for all intents and purposes.
- Avoid Qualifiers-

Instead: He was very tired.

Say: He was tired.

He was exhausted.

# **Use verbs, rather than noun forms of verbs**

- Active verbs take less space than gerunds (a noun with -ing, like frittering and spicing) or infinitives (to shout, to muzzle).

Instead: **Dancing is hard for me.**

Say: **I cannot dance.**

Instead: **To dream is soothing.**

Say: **Dreams soothe.**

# State personal opinions or beliefs directly and without labelling them as belonging to you.

I think...

I feel...

I believe...

I realize...

automatic weapons should be outlawed.

Instead, be direct, and do not qualify your opinions:

Automatic weapons should be outlawed.

# Eliminate Wordiness

- For a sentence to flow well, it should not be cluttered with unnecessary words. Sentences should be concise and direct.

Instead: I enjoy power walking at a quick pace in the nighttime twilight under the dark sky.

Say: I enjoy power walking at night.

Instead: She is one of the many girls who attends and walks the corridors of my school.

Say: She attends my school.

# Remove Redundant Words

- Remove words that are redundant. These are some common pairs of words that are redundant; one word should be removed from each pair.

**first and foremost**

**each and every**

**any and all**

**hopes and desires**

**always and forever**

**final outcome**

**ancient history**

**future plans**

**free gift**

**terrible tragedy**

**reflect back**

# Remove Meaningless Intensifiers

- Intensifiers such as so, very, many, quite, really, and definitely are unnecessary. If they add no significance to the sentence, they can be removed.

Instead: : Lisa is definitely a very skilled writer.

Say: : Lisa is a skilled writer.

Instead: She really, truly dances quite well.

Say: She dances well.

# Remove Unnecessary Prepositions

Instead: I go to work from between 9:00 a.m. to about 5:00 p.m. [with and take a one-hour break in between at about around noon.

Say: I work from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and take a one-hour break around noon.

# Avoid Lengthiness

- Avoid lengthy expressions that make a sentence wordy. Eliminating this problem may require moving words around in the sentence.

Instead: At this point in time, there are currently far too many prisoners of war, also known as POWs.

Say: There are currently far too many prisoners of war (POWs).

Instead: If you really want to know, I can truthfully say that I actually don't really care about where we go to eat for dinner.

Say: I don't care where we eat dinner.

# Sample Paragraph

- Original:

For nearly 20 years when asked the question what I would like to be when I grow up, I always used to think about writing, but I did not always consider writing as something I might like to be doing full-time. The foundation of my career goals started out in fifth grade, when my teacher told me a story I had written might be at a high enough standard to be publishable in the future. I was intrigued by this profession because I was always reading, but at the time I was always reading about marine mammals and had formed the impression that I would like to become a marine biologist because I had read everything about whales. As time passed and I became better acquainted with the study of science, I found that the job of a writer was something that would fit very well with my personality and goals in life, because it allows you to read about anything you want and you do not have to make a lot of measurements. (173 words)

- Stripped down without losing any of the meaning:

For 20 years I have liked writing, but I did not always think of making a living by it. I first thought of writing as a job when my fifth grade teacher told me I might turn a story of mine into a children's book. I read all the time, but back then I read about whales. I thought I wanted to study Marine Biology. As I learned more about research, I found I liked talking about whales better than swimming with them. (83 words).

# Thank You