

Grammar: What You Really Need to Know

As I tell my college students, poor grammar in a presentation, be it a cover letter for a job application or a query letter to an agent or an editor, is like going to an interview with a grease stain on your tie, a run in your pantyhose, or food stuck between your front teeth. It makes a terrible first impression.

There are five main categories that tend to repeat in many people's writing: run-ons, fragments, subject/verb agreement errors, pronoun/antecedent agreement and other pronoun errors, and modifier errors. We'll also take a look at a few marks of punctuation.

The Basics

In writing, the basic structure is the sentence. By way of review, each sentence must have a subject (what the sentence is about), must have a verb or predicate (what the subject is doing or what it is), and must express a complete thought.

Henry was fishing yesterday.

This structure is called a simple sentence. It has one subject, **Henry**, one verb, **was fishing**, and is a complete thought.

Henry and Ida were fishing and hiking yesterday.

This is still a simple sentence, only now with a compound subject and a compound verb.

Run-ons

When two or more sentences are joined, you have created a compound sentence. This is where run-ons can creep in. There are several ways to appropriately form compound sentences. Here are two sentences:

Henry was fishing yesterday. He went home when the rain began.

Henry was fishing yesterday, but he went home when the rain began.

Now they have been joined by a comma and a coordinating conjunction. When using this method to join sentences, it is a package deal. The comma and coordinating conjunction **MUST ALWAYS** accompany each other. Do not place a comma before every coordinating conjunction, however. The sentence could simply have a compound verb, and the comma would be unnecessary in that case:

Henry was fishing yesterday but went home when the rain began.

In this example, the coordinating conjunction *but* is joining the two verbs, *was fishing* and *went* that make up the compound verb for the subject *Henry*, and no comma is necessary. Back to our run-ons.

Henry was fishing yesterday he went home when the rain began.

Henry was fishing yesterday but he went home when the rain began.

Henry was fishing yesterday, he went home when the rain began.

All of these are run-ons, even the example with the comma. While that last example may seem correct because there is some punctuation, a comma alone is not strong enough to separate two complete sentences. Commas have many uses which we'll talk about later, but joining two complete sentences is not one of them. The comma **MUST** be paired with a coordinating conjunction. There are seven of these:

and but or for nor so yet

You may also join sentences using a semi-colon.

Henry was fishing yesterday; he went home when the rain began.

Do not use semi-colons throughout your writing, though. Use them sparingly. They should be used to indicate to the reader that the two thoughts expressed in the two sentences are closely related. You may include a transitional expression to clarify the relationship between the two thoughts.

Henry was fishing yesterday; however, he went home when the rain began.

Notice that the semi-colon comes before the transitional expression and a comma after, always.

Fragments

Complex sentences are formed when a dependent and an independent clause are joined. A clause has a subject and a verb. An independent clause expresses a complete thought and can stand alone as a sentence. A dependent clause also has a subject and a verb, but it contains a dependent word that demands more information and thus cannot stand alone as a sentence.

While Henry was fishing yesterday.

Do you see the problem? There is still a subject and a verb, but the subordinating conjunction *while* tells the reader that more information is needed to complete the thought. Thus, it is a dependent clause and a fragment.

While Henry was fishing yesterday, the rain began.

Now the dependent clause is joined to an independent clause, and the fragment is fixed.

In a way, the fragment is the opposite of the run-on. While the run-on is two or more sentences inappropriately joined, the fragment isn't even one sentence. It is missing a subject, a verb, a subject and a verb, or a complete thought. Sometimes a fragment is formed when information that should have been included in the previous sentence becomes its own sentence.

Henry was fishing yesterday. In the cold and damp.

In the cold and damp needs to be joined to the complete thought before it.

Fragments are sometimes used for emphasis, but be careful with this approach. Do not do it too often, and make sure your reader understands that you have created the fragment on purpose.

Subject/Verb Agreement

Verbs must always agree in number with their subjects. A singular subject needs a singular verb; a plural subject needs a plural verb.

Henry was fishing yesterday.

A singular form of the verb here agrees with its singular subject.

Henry and Ida were fishing yesterday.

Now there is a plural form of the verb agreeing with its plural subject. This is simple enough, but problems can creep in. One way this happens is when a prepositional phrase comes between the subject and its verb. Look at this example:

Each of the girls have brought their own gear.

This sentence is incorrect. The subject, *Each*, is singular and must take the singular verb *has*, not the plural *have*. Ah, you say, but *girls* is plural. This is true, but *girls* is not the subject of the sentence; it is the object of the preposition *of*. Remember, the verb must agree in number with its subject, not some other word in the sentence. There is an additional error in this sentence. You can't use *their* because, again, *each* is singular, so you would need to use *her*. More on this in the section on pronouns. The sentence should read as follows:

Each of the girls has brought her own gear.

Another way subject/verb agreement errors pop up is with compound subjects that are joined by the coordinating conjunction *or*. When a compound subject is joined by *and*, there is no problem.

Henry and Ida were fishing yesterday.

While *Henry* and *Ida* are both singular, the *and* joins them together and makes them into a plural subject, hence the plural *were*. However, things change when the coordinating conjunction used to join the compound subject is *or*.

Henry or Ida was fishing yesterday.

The *or* keeps the two parts of the subject apart from each other, and the compound subject remains singular. However, if the two parts of the compound subject are not both singular or both plural, difficulties can arise. This is an interesting situation. When a compound subject has one singular part and one plural part, the verb will agree with the one closer to it.

Henry or the Norsworthys were fishing yesterday.

The Norsworthys or Henry was fishing yesterday.

In the first example, *Norsworthys*, plural, is closer to the verb, so you need a plural form of the verb, *were*. In the second example, *Henry*, singular, is closer to the verb, so you need the singular *was*.

Pronouns

As you certainly know, a pronoun takes the place of a noun or pronoun. There are many occasions for errors with pronouns.

One error occurs when a subjective case pronoun is used in place of an objective case pronoun.

You and I were fishing.

Here we have two subjective case pronouns, *You* and *I* acting as the subject. Now look at the next example:

Henry wanted to talk to you and I before we went fishing.

This almost sounds correct, but it is not. The phrase needs to be *you and me* because in this sentence, the pronouns are acting as objects of the preposition *to*, so even though it sounds correct, you need the objective case. Here is the corrected sentence:

Henry wanted to talk to you and me before we went fishing.

If you're ever unsure, let the pronoun stand alone to find out which one would be correct.

Henry wanted to talk to I before we went fishing.

Henry wanted to talk to me before we went fishing.

The second example, of course, is the correct one. A similar situation can occur in a comparison when the verb has been left off the end of the sentence.

Henry is better at fishing than me.

This sentence may sound correct, but it is not. While in English we are allowed to leave the verb off in this type of comparison, do not let this lead to an error.

Henry is better at fishing than I.

Now we have a correct construction because what you are really saying is this:

Henry is better at fishing than I (am).

Another frequent pronoun error is when possessive pronouns and simple contractions are used in place of each other.

it's	its
you're	your
who's	whose

If there is an apostrophe, it is a contraction of two words. Otherwise, it is possessive.

It's (It is) fun to go fishing.

The cat chased its tail (the tail belongs to the cat).

You're (You are) welcome.

Your car is in the lake (the car belongs to you).

Perhaps the most frequent pronoun error is with pronoun/antecedent agreement. An antecedent is the word the pronoun refers to in a sentence, and the pronoun must agree in number with its antecedent. Look at this example:

A child must learn to obey their parents.

This is incorrect because since *child* is singular, the pronoun referring to it must also be singular, and *their* is plural.

A child must learn to obey his or her parents.

There. Fixed. This problem also comes up when using indefinite pronouns.

Everyone must hand in their papers at the end of class.

Everyone is singular, always, so a singular pronoun must be used to refer to it.

Everyone must hand in his or her paper at the end of class.

Modifier Errors

Words or groups of words are often used to modify other words in a sentence. Errors generally occur in two types: dangling and misplaced.

Dangling modifiers occur at the beginning of a sentence.

Dressed in a raincoat and boots, Henry thought Ida was prepared for the rain.

Who was dressed in the raincoat and boots, Henry or Ida? The rule is that if the modifier at the beginning of the sentence doesn't explain what it modifies in the modifier itself, what is being modified must come immediately after.

When Ida put on her raincoat and boots, Henry could see she was prepared for the rain.

Now the meaning is clear. A misplaced modifier can happen anywhere in the sentence.

Henry swatted at the wasp that stung him with a newspaper.

Do you see the problem? Did the wasp sting Henry with a newspaper?

Henry used a newspaper to swat at the wasp that stung him.

That's better.

Arguably the most famous misplaced modifier is a line in a Marx Brothers movie (if you haven't ever watched one, you should).

Groucho Marx is speaking at a dinner party, and he says,

"One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas."

Do you see the problem? Who was in the pajamas--Groucho or the elephant?

However, he goes on to make it clear for us:

"One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How an elephant got in my pajamas, I'll never know."

Ah, so the elephant was in his pajamas. This is silly, of course, which is why you should look to avoid these errors.

Punctuation

We'll take a look at commas. There are several hard and fast rules:

1) Commas and Coordinating Conjunctions (which we have already examined)

Henry was fishing yesterday, but he went home when the rain began.

2) Commas and Introductory Material

Whenever you have material that opens a sentence, you will place a comma between the introduction and the main sentence.

Yes, Henry was fishing yesterday.

In any case, Henry went fishing yesterday.

While Henry was fishing yesterday, the rain began.

3) Commas and Items in a Series

When you have three or more items in a series, you need commas between them, even after the second-to-last item in the series.

Henry brought fishing poles, bait, and sandwiches with him.

That last comma, also known as the Oxford comma, is quite controversial. Some argue vehemently against the use, and others are just as passionate for it. Most media style manuals,

such as AP and CNN, say not to use it. A court case from several years ago in Maine shows just how important it is. This is from a CNN article about the case:

“If you have ever doubted the importance of the humble Oxford comma, let this supremely persnickety Maine labor dispute set you straight.

“A group of dairy drivers argued that they deserved overtime pay for certain tasks they had completed. The company said they did not. An appeals court sided with the drivers, saying that the guidelines themselves were made too ambiguous by, you guessed it, a lack of an Oxford comma.”

The drivers hadn't been paid the overtime they said the contract called for, and yes, a missing Oxford comma decided the case. The drivers, by the way, were awarded \$5 million in back overtime pay.

4) Commas with Nonrestrictive Clauses

These can be tricky. In a nonrestrictive clause, the information is just an oh-by-the-way comment, interesting but not essential to the meaning of the sentence, and commas set it off from the rest of the sentence. In a restrictive clause, the information is considered essential to the sentence, so no commas.

The woman in the red hat was blocking my view.

Here the fact that she is wearing a red hat identifies which woman we are talking about, the one in the red hat, so there are no commas. It is considered essential information.

The woman in the front row, who is wearing a red hat, is blocking my view.

Now we have already identified which woman we're talking about, the one in the front row. The fact that she is wearing a red hat is extra information and considered nonrestrictive, so we need commas.

Quotation Marks

There are hard and fast rules about how to punctuate direct quotations. Look at the following examples.

Henry said, “I will be going fishing tomorrow.”

Notice that there is comma after *Henry said*. Notice also that the period at the end of the quote is INSIDE the quotation mark. Periods and commas ALWAYS go inside the quotation marks,

except when citing material in a research paper. Now look at these examples. Pay attention to where the other marks of punctuation go in relation to the quotation marks.

“I don’t think,” Henry said, “that I’ll be going fishing.”

“I will be going fishing,” Henry said.

Now look at this example.

"Will Henry be going fishing?" he asked.

Did you notice that the "h" in *he* is lower case? That is because the question mark ends the quote, not the sentence. The quote is only part of the sentence.

Colon

A colon introduces a list, an explanation, a quotation, an example, and so on. The important thing is that a complete statement ALWAYS comes first.

Henry brought the following items to the lake: fishing poles, bait, and sandwiches.

Too often, this is what happens:

Henry needs to bring certain things to the lake, such as: fishing poles, bait, and sandwiches.

In this example, what come before the colon is NOT a complete sentence, so the colon may not be used here.

Miscellaneous (not technically grammar but important nonetheless)

Wordiness

Avoid unnecessarily repeating yourself. Examine these examples:

surrounded on all sides (If you’re surrounded, of course the enemy is on all sides.)

brown in color (The reader knows brown is a color.)

in the month of August (The reader knows August is a month.)

end result (just result—results do come at the end.)

refer back (just refer—to refer to something is to go back to it.)

free gift (When was the last time you were asked to pay for a gift?)

each and every (one or the other—you don't need both.)

Look at how much can be removed from the following sentence, yet the meaning is not lost:

In the early part of the month of August, a hurricane was moving threateningly toward Houston.

In early August, a hurricane threatened Houston.

Here are examples of unnecessary words that clutter your sentences:

Due to the fact that (because.)

At the present time (today)

It is a fact that (delete)

It is clear that (delete)

The point is that you want to avoid saying more than necessary without compromising the sense of the sentence.

There is very much more to grammar, but these are the basics; these are the most frequent errors that I have had to read and correct in my years of teaching writing. Good luck finding your own errors!