

Brainfuse Writing Lab

Essential Grammar Guide

A Reference for Grammar, Usage, and Mechanics

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Run-on Sentences: An independent clause is a complete thought that can stand alone as a sentence. When writers join two or more independent clauses together without a conjunction, they have formed run-on sentences. These are hard to follow and need to be revised.

Incorrect: Brazil is the largest country in South America it is the fifth largest country in the world.

Revised (compound sentence): Brazil is the largest country in South America, and it is the fifth largest country in the world.

-OR-

Revised (semicolon): Brazil is the largest country in South America; it is the fifth largest country in the world.

-OR-

Revised (two sentences): Brazil is the largest country in South America. It is the fifth largest country in the world.

Comma Splices: When a writer joins two independent clauses together with a comma and no conjunction, it is known as a comma splice. This mistake is very similar to a run-on sentence. Just like the run-on sentence examples above, writers can correct a comma splice by adding a coordinating conjunction, using a semicolon, or using a period.

Incorrect: I enjoy baking cookies, however I do not like eating sweets. [*note that **however** is a conjunctive adverb, not a coordinating conjunction. As a result, this is a comma splice*]

Revised (compound sentence): I enjoy baking cookies, but I do not like eating sweets.

-OR-

Revised (semicolon): I enjoy baking cookies; however, I do not like eating sweets.

-OR-

Revised (two sentences): I enjoy baking cookies. However, I do not like eating sweets.

Sentence Fragments: A sentence fragment is not a complete sentence; as a result, it does not convey a complete thought. A complete sentence needs to be a complete thought. That thought needs to include a **subject** and a **predicate**. In narratives and informal writing, fragments can be used stylistically to alter the pace and convey certain feelings. However, writers should always avoid them in formal assignments such as research papers and argumentative essays.

The subject = Who/What the sentence is about.

The predicate = what the subject does, or what the subject is. Use "what the subject is" if you are using a linking verb. A linking verb shows a relationship between a noun and an adjective. Linking verbs can usually be replaced by the verb "to seem," and the sentence will still make sense.

- **The leaves fell.**
- **The leaves turned brown.** (*Turned in this sentence is a linking verb*)
- **Look at the leaves.** (*For requests and commands, **you** is understood to be the subject.*)

We can recognize sentence fragments by asking ourselves questions to determine if an attribute of a complete sentence is missing.

Fragment: Might have to develop new strategies. [*Where is the subject? Who or what is doing or being?*]

Complete: I might have to develop new strategies.

Fragment: Parallel parking. [*Where is the predicate? What is the action or what is it like?*]

Complete: Parallel parking can be difficult

Fragment: When I step on the brake. [*What is missing here: the subject, the predicate, or both?*]

Complete: When I step on the brake, the car squeals.

Sentence fragments can often be combined with the preceding or following sentence to form a complete idea.

Incorrect: Students participating in sports develop excellent collaborative skills. Which help them achieve academic success. *[The second sentence lacks a clear subject. A nonessential clause beginning with “which” is always offset with a comma.]*

Revised: Students participating in sports develop excellent collaborative skills, which help them achieve academic success.

Rambling Sentences: These sentences go on and on and on. Rambling sentences are often made up of long strands of clauses and parenthetical statements.

If you read your paper aloud and any of the sentences make you run out of breath or forget the point that you wanted to make, it is likely a rambling sentence. To correct a rambling sentence, break the sentence into two or more sentences.

Incorrect (*caution: you may run out of breath if you read this out loud*): **(1)** The guided tour, which started at the drawbridge, lasted for more than two hours, during which time my uncle, cousin, and I walked through a lot of dark rooms and learned about the history of the castle, which had endured at least a dozen attacks, but it turned into a tourist attraction with a gift shop in the dungeon after the fall of the monarchy. **1 sentence**

One Possible Revision: **(1)** My uncle, cousin, and I went on a guided tour of a castle, and it lasted for more than two hours. **(2)** As we walked through dark rooms, our guide told us that the castle had endured at least a dozen attacks. **(3)** After the fall of the monarchy, however, the site was turned into a tourist attraction. **(4)** It even has a gift shop in the dungeon. **4 sentences**

Passive Voice: Academic writing should be direct. The passive voice is a sentence construction that involves a subject receiving an action. This can lead to ambiguity. These sentences should be rewritten to ensure the subject performs an action.

Passive: The Duke Ellington tune was performed by the jazz ensemble.

Revised: The jazz ensemble performed the Duke Ellington tune.

Passive (ambiguous subject): The teenager was advised from operating a car in a snowstorm. *[Who advised the teenager?]*

Revised: The driving school instructor advised the teenager from operating a car in a snowstorm.

Passive (research): Happiness was considered important by the study on teenagers.

Revised: The researchers considered happiness an important measure for teenagers.

Subject-Verb Agreement: Subjects and verbs need to agree in number. If a subject is plural, its verb needs to be plural. If a subject is singular, its verb needs to be singular.

Singular: The shoe fits.

Plural: The shoes fit.

Singular: My vote is cast.

Plural: The votes are cast.

Compound subjects include more than one noun and are often joined by a conjunction like **and**, **or**, or **nor**.

When a compound subject uses "**and**" to join two words together, it requires a plural verb.

The **reels and the projector** **are** damaged.

When a compound subject uses "nor" or "or" to join two words together, the verb should agree with the noun that is closest to it.

Either **the reels or the projector** **is** damaged.

Neither **the projector nor the reels** **are** damaged.

Verb Tenses: When you are discussing events that took place in one time frame, do not shift from one verb tense to another.

Incorrect: Two weeks ago, I nervously **walked** into my first college class. I **gain** confidence in my ability to succeed as my professor **reads** over the syllabus.

Revised: Two weeks ago, I nervously **walked** into my first college class. I **gained** confidence in my ability to succeed as my professor **read** over the syllabus.

The following table includes examples of each verb tense.

<p>Present (simple)</p> <p>I write essays.</p>	<p>Past (simple)</p> <p>I wrote an essay last week.</p>	<p>Future (simple)</p> <p>I will write an essay tomorrow.</p>
<p>Present Continuous</p> <p>I am currently writing an essay.</p>	<p>Past Continuous</p> <p>I was writing my essay last night.</p>	<p>Future Continuous</p> <p>I will be writing an essay tomorrow.</p>
<p>Present Perfect</p> <p>I have written essays before.</p>	<p>Past Perfect</p> <p>I had written only short essays by the time I began high school.</p>	<p>Future Perfect</p> <p>By tomorrow evening, I will have finished my essay.</p>
<p>Present Perfect Continuous</p> <p>I have been writing an essay since last week.</p>	<p>Past Perfect Continuous</p> <p>I had been writing essays for several years when I began college.</p>	<p>Future Perfect Continuous</p> <p>I will have been writing my essay for two weeks when I turn it in tomorrow evening.</p>

Perfect Tenses: Perfect tenses are used to describe actions that have occurred or will occur before another action.

The **present perfect tense** is used to describe an action that has taken place at an unspecified time. This tense can also be used for an action that started in the past and is still occurring (or can occur). In the example above, I am describing my experience with writing essays in a general sense.

The **past perfect tense** is used to describe an action that happened before something in the past. In the example above, I am describing the essays I wrote *before* beginning high school (something that has already happened).

The **future perfect tense** is used to describe actions that will be completed before another point or action in the future. In the example above, I am describing finishing my essay (not yet completed) in context of tomorrow evening (a point in the future after I finish the essay).

Literary Tense (Literary Present): Most literary essays refer to events from works of literature in the present tense. These essays should also describe how artists express themselves in the present tense.

Incorrect: In "The Raven," Edgar Allan Poe **used** a gloomy tone and ominous imagery to convey the speaker's grief.

Revised: In "The Raven," Edgar Allan Poe **uses** a gloomy tone and ominous imagery to convey the speaker's grief.

Incorrect: In the opening chapter of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael **described** preparing for a sea voyage.

Revised: In the opening chapter of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael **describes** preparing for a sea voyage.

Pronoun Case: Pronouns can act as subjects, objects, and words that show possession.

Use **subjective pronouns** to replace a subject of a sentence:

I, you, he/she/it, we, they, who

Use **objective pronouns** to replace any object in a sentence, including direct objects, indirect objects, and objects of the preposition:

me, you, her/him/it, us, them, whom

Use **possessive pronouns** to replace nouns that show possession:

*my, your, his/her/its, our, their
mine, yours, ours, theirs, them*

Incorrect: **Me** and my roommate cleaned our apartment. *[This sentence uses an objective pronoun where a subjective one is needed]*

Revision: My roommate and **I** cleaned our apartment.

Incorrect: My neighbor asked my roommate and **I** for advice. *[This sentence uses a subjective pronoun where an objective one is needed]*

Revision: My neighbor asked **me** and my roommate for advice.

Pronoun Agreement: Make sure that all pronouns clearly agree with their antecedents. An antecedent is the noun that comes before the pronoun and is what the pronoun refers to. Use plural pronouns to represent plural terms. Carefully check your instructor expectations or the assignment's style guide, as some guides allow plural pronouns to be used with singular antecedents with gender is unknown.

The **player** [*<<singular antecedent*] will end **her** [*<<singular pronoun*] training soon.
The **players** [*<<plural antecedent*] will end **their** [*<<plural pronoun*] season soon.

Ambiguous Pronouns: Ambiguous pronouns are pronouns that can refer to multiple nouns in a sentence. Make sure that each pronoun clearly represents a noun in your sentence. Remember that what is obvious to you might not be clear to the reader.

Incorrect: Before Judee joined Sarah's band, she did not realize how talented she was at drumming.
[Who is talented at drumming?]

One Revision: Before Judee joined Sarah's band, she did not realize how talented Sarah was at drumming.

Demonstrative Pronouns: These pronouns point to specific objects. They include *this, that, these, and those*. Writers often use them to avoid wordiness.

Overly wordy: Nurses need to be selfless. Being selfless is why nursing is such an extraordinary profession.

Revised: Nurses need to be selfless. That is why nursing is such an extraordinary profession.

Misplaced Modifiers: A modifier is a word or phrase that describes another word in the same sentence. A misplaced modifier is a word or phrase that is placed too far away from the word it describes, which can cause confusion. For example:

Incorrect: The cat ran to his owner with a toy. [*"with a toy" is ambiguous. It should modify "ran," but is too far away to be clear.*]

Correct: The cat ran with a toy to his owner.

Dangling Modifiers: Phrases are often used to describe people or things. If a modifying phrase is placed at the beginning of a sentence, it should precede the noun it modifies. When it is difficult to identify who or what a phrase is modifying, then you might have a dangling modifier. For example:

Incorrect: Running for the train, the hat was lost. [*Hats do not usually run for trains.*]

One Revision: Running for the train, the passenger lost his hat.

Squinting Modifiers: A squinting modifier is a modifier that is unclear because it can modify a word (or phrase) before or after it. To avoid a squinting modifier, place the modifier so that it is clear which word (or phrase) the modifier describes. For example:

Incorrect: Dogs who play fetch often enjoy running. [*Often is unclear. Do dogs play fetch often to enjoy running or do dogs who enjoy running like fetch?*]

One Revision: Dogs who often play fetch enjoy running.

Parallelism: Parallelism is a principle used by writers to help convey ideas clearly to the reader. As a result, parallelism helps to make sentences easy to read and understand. At its core, parallelism means that the same form or structure is applied to elements within a sentence that have the same level of importance. Parallelism is particularly useful in a list or in an outline of ideas. Without parallelism, readers are often left with questions or uncertainty about items in a list. For example:

Incorrect: If you go to the store, you can pay with cash, checks, or you can even pay with the credit card and bitcoin. [*Are credit cards and bitcoin required together to make a purchase? Does the store only accept a single type of credit card?*]

Correct: If you go to the store, you can pay with cash, check, credit card, or bitcoin.

Incorrect: She likes swimming, dancing, and to make cookies.

Correct: She likes swimming, dancing, and baking cookies.

Prepositions: Prepositions show location, time, or a relationship between words. Writers often forget prepositions or use the wrong one, which can cause confusion. Since prepositions show relationships between words, some style guides recommend that writers avoid ending sentences with prepositions. This is not a convention that all style guides follow, so you should ask your instructor for his/her preference.

FUNCTION	EXAMPLE
<p>LOCATION Use at to indicate the general vicinity or area Use in to indicate inside the building, enclosed area, etc.</p>	<p>The dog is under <u>the bed</u>. My mom is sitting on <u>the couch</u>. The spoon is in <u>the silverware drawer</u>. Meet me at <u>15 East Main Street</u>.</p>
<p>TIME In is typically used with parts of the day, with months, with years, and with seasons On is used with days At is used with noon, night, midnight, and with the time of day.</p>	<p>We celebrate Christmas in <u>December</u>. The parade is on <u>Saturday</u>. The class starts at <u>noon</u>.</p>
<p>DIRECTION/MOVEMENT Direction prepositions are used to indicate the direction of someone or something.</p>	<p>I am getting out of <u>the pool</u>. The rabbit jumped into <u>its cage</u>. We walked toward <u>the entrance</u>. Tomorrow, the cat is going to <u>the vet</u>.</p>

<p>POSSESSION Of is used to show possession of a place or possessive pronouns (like mine, yours, etc.) <i>(Of + noun/possessive pronoun)</i> With is used with objects/materials/animals, accents, and physical characteristics <i>(With + adjective/noun)</i> To is used to show possession, and can be used in the expression “belong to” <i>(To + object pronouns)</i></p>	<p>The window of <u>your car</u> is open. Denver is the capital of <u>Colorado</u></p> <p>The dog with <u>the red collar</u> is cute. A cat with <u>yellow</u> eyes ran by the house.</p> <p>The red scarf belongs to <u>my mom</u>.</p>
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Commonly Confused Words: There are some errors that spellcheck cannot catch.

Homophones are words that sound the same but differ in meaning. Some examples include:

affect/effect: **Affect** is a verb and **effect** is a noun.

Incorrect: The condition of a baseball card **effects** its value.

Correct: The condition of a baseball card **affects** its value.

To/too/two: **Too** is used as an intensifier, **to** is a preposition/infinitive marker, and **two** is a number.

I am **too** tired to go **to** the track and run **two** miles.

their, they're, there: **There** is most commonly an adverb that refers to a place, **their** is a possessive pronoun or possessive adjective, and **they're** is a contraction that shortens *they are*.

My family members will be **there** soon; **they're** taking **their** dog on a walk first.

Than/then: **Than** is used when making comparisons, and **then** is used to indicate a consequence.

If my friend says he enjoys live music more **than** museums, **then** I will buy concert tickets.

Accept/except: **Accept** is a verb that describes agreeing/receiving, and **except** refers to an exception/exclusion.

He came very close to **accepting** the job offer; everything about it seemed perfect **except** moving across the country.

Apart/a part: **Apart** is most commonly used to indicate a separation between things, and **a part** refers to a portion of a whole.

She felt like **a part** of the team, even when she was **apart** from her teammates.

Cite/sight/site: *Cite* is a verb that describes referring to something from a source, *sight* is a noun that describes the ability to see, and *site* refers to a location.

Discussing his influences, the author **cites** a short story that takes place at a construction **site**. He focuses his analysis on the **sight** of a sunset peeking out from behind the scaffolding.

Amount vs. Number: These words refer to how much or how many of something there is. *Number* refers to things that are countable (such as eggs, days, and quarters), and *amount* refers to uncountable things (such as liquid, work, and respect).

Incorrect: A large **amount** of students worked on the project.

Correct: A large **number** of students worked on the project.

Incorrect: He completed a small **number** of work because of the going away party for his boss.

Correct: He completed a small **amount** of work because of the going away party for his boss.

First Person: Outside of personal narratives, most instructors discourage the use of first-person perspective. First-person perspective sentences that use I, me, my, we, us, or our should not be used. In particular, I believe/I think/I feel statements should be avoided in argumentative writing; writers should simply state their claims.

Incorrect: As for myself, I believe writing tutors help students become better writers.

Revised: Writing tutors help students become better writers

Second Person: Oftentimes, sentences that use the second person perspective make assumptions about the reader. Writers should avoid directly addressing their audience by using you, your, yours or yourself in formal essays.

Incorrect: As you can see from this quote, the author explains that insufficient sleep impacts a college student's GPA. As a college student, you should try to sleep eight hours each night.

Revised: The author explains that insufficient sleep impacts a college student's GPA. College students should try to sleep eight hours each night.

Filler Words: Succinct and impactful sentences are an integral part of a successful essay. Writers should avoid filler words that do not add meaning to their sentences.

Vague & Wordy: The author definitely gets the theme across through really interesting imagery.

Revised: The author conveys the theme of betrayal through unsettling imagery that foreshadows the protagonist's fate.

Colloquialisms + Clichés: Colloquialisms are informal phrases that are used conversationally. Clichés are overused expressions. Both should be avoided in academic writing.

Colloquial: The author does a 180-degree turn from his initial argument and asserts that eating an entirely organic diet is not possible for most people.

Revised: The author contradicts his initial argument and asserts that eating an entirely organic diet is not possible for most people.

Cliché: In this day and age, most businesses promote products and services on social media.

Revised: Today, most businesses promote products and services on social media.

Contractions: Contractions are shortened versions of words or phrases using an apostrophe to denote missing letters. While we shorten words in everyday life with contractions, many instructors discourage students from using contractions in academic writing. The words that the contraction shortens are always preferable in a formal assignment.

Informal: The short story's ending suggests that the protagonist **can't** accept defeat and isn't willing to change.

Revised: The short story's ending suggests that the protagonist **cannot** accept defeat and is not willing to change.

Commas: Commas are used as small breaks within a sentence to help separate different words, clauses, or ideas. Use a comma:

After introductory phrases

After listening to several hours of testimony, the jury needed a break.

To separate two independent clauses that are joined by a conjunction

The exhibit on dinosaurs is no longer at the museum, but you can still see the skeleton of a giant T-Rex in the lobby.

To separate two different adjectives that modify a noun

Heavy, gray clouds hung over the village.

To set off parenthetical comments within a sentence.

The candidate, who was featured on the news, is now ahead in the polls.

Punctuating Quotations: When you are directly quoting another work, quotation marks are often necessary to indicate that it is not your own words. Quotations are also used in a narrative to indicate speech by a character. Generally, end punctuation should be included inside of the quotation marks unless otherwise indicated by your specific style guide or instructor.

Before a short quotation: add a comma after an introductory phrase.

The author states, "The world is round."

Before a block quotation: you should use a colon.

Abraham Lincoln began to address the crowd:
Four score and seven years ago...

End Marks: Reread your sentences and make sure that you have chosen the correct end punctuation.

Period: Use a period to end declarative sentences. They state facts and opinions.

Books are becoming artifacts.

Question mark: Use a question mark to end interrogative sentences. They pose questions.

Will people read printed books in one hundred years?

Exclamation mark: Use an exclamation mark for interjections. *[Note that these should rarely be used in academic papers because they convey excitement, not objectivity.]*

"These rare books need to be preserved!" Henry shouted.

Colons: When you are introducing a series or an element that explains or describes the information before it, a colon is often the best choice.

Introduce a list: If you want to use a colon to introduce a list, it needs to be preceded by a complete sentence, not an incomplete sentence with a phrase like "the following" or "such as."

Incorrect: The supply closet contains the following: legal pads, pens, paper for the printer, and binders.

Revised: The supply closet contains several business-related items: legal pads, pens, paper for the printer, and binders.

Emphasize related clauses: If you want to use a colon between two independent clauses, the clauses have to be strongly connected and you need to want to emphasize the second clause.

The results were undeniable: I was a genius.

Semicolons: A semicolon is often used to create a separation between ideas in two closely related complete thoughts without including a conjunction or creating separate sentences

Join together two closely related sentences: Use a semicolon to join two closely related sentences without using a conjunction.

I did not go to the gym today; there was a last-minute task that I needed to complete instead.

In a list of phrases: Use a semicolon in a list of phrases that contains one or more commas. It prevents confusion.

I actually met many new people at the reunion: the new principal, who had just accepted the position; the class president, with whom I had never spoken; and a judge from the class of 1956.

Apostrophes: It is important to clearly denote possession for your reader when you are writing.

To show possession: Add an apostrophe s ('s) to the end of a singular noun or simply an apostrophe to the end of a plural noun to denote possession.

The parents' parking lot was filled at 3:00 p.m.

One parent's meeting with a teacher needed to be rescheduled.

The Reyes's garden wins awards every year. *[Note that you may also write this as "The Reyes' garden wins awards every year." However, your instructor or specific style guide may have a clear preference for one or the other.]*