

1. Missing comma after an introductory element

- ▶ Determined to get the job done, we worked all weekend.
- ▶ In German, nouns are always capitalized.

Readers usually need a small pause between an **introductory word, phrase, or clause** and the main part of the sentence, a pause most often signaled by a **comma**. Try to get into the habit of using a comma after every introductory element. When the introductory element is very short, you don't always need a comma after it. But you're never wrong if you do use a comma.

2. Vague pronoun reference

POSSIBLE REFERENCE TO MORE THAN ONE WORD

- ▶ Transmitting radio signals by satellite is a way of overcoming the problem of scarce airwaves and limiting how ~~they~~ ^{the airwaves} are used.
^

Does *they* refer to the signals or the airwaves? The editing clarifies what is being limited.

REFERENCE IMPLIED BUT NOT STATED

- ▶ The company prohibited smoking, ~~which~~ ^{a policy} many employees resented.
^

What does *which* refer to? The editing clarifies what employees resented.

A **pronoun** - a word such as *she*, *yourself*, *her*, *it*, *this*, *who*, or *which* - should clearly refer to the word or words it replaces (called the **antecedent**) elsewhere in the sentence or in a previous sentence. If more than one word could be the antecedent or if no specific antecedent is present in the sentence, edit to make the meaning clear.

3. Missing comma in a compound sentence

- ▶ The words “I do” may sound simple, but they mean a life commitment.

A **compound sentence** consists of two or more parts that could each stand alone as a sentence. When the parts are joined by a **coordinating conjunction** - *and, but, so, yet, or, nor, or for* - use a comma before the conjunction to indicate a pause between the two thoughts. In very short sentences, the comma is optional if the sentence can be easily understood without it. But you'll never be wrong to use a comma.

4. Wrong word

- ▶ *Paradise Lost* contains many ~~illusions~~^{allusions} to classical mythology.

Illusions means "false ideas or appearances," and *allusions* means "references."

- ▶ Working at a computer all day often means being ~~sedate~~^{sedentary} for long periods of time.

Sedate means "composed, dignified," and *sedentary* means "requiring much sitting."

Wrong-word errors can involve mixing up words that sound alike, using a word with the wrong shade of meaning, or using a word with a completely wrong meaning. Many wrong-word errors are due to the improper use of homonyms - words that are pronounced alike but spelled differently, such as *their* and *there*.

5. Missing comma(s) with a nonrestrictive element

▶ Marina, who was the president of the club, was first to speak.

The reader does not need the clause *who was the president of the club* to know the basic meaning of the sentence: Marina was first to speak.

A **nonrestrictive element** - one that is not essential to the basic meaning of the sentence - could be removed and the sentence would still make sense. Use commas to set off any nonrestrictive parts of a sentence.

6. Wrong or missing verb ending

- ▶ The United States ~~drop~~^{dropped} an atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945.

It's easy to forget the **verb** endings -s (or -es) and -ed (or -d) because they are not always pronounced clearly when spoken. In addition, some varieties of English use the endings in ways that are different from uses in academic and professional English.

7. Wrong or missing preposition

▶ We met ~~in~~^{on} Union Street ~~San~~ⁱⁿ Francisco.

In and *on* both show place, but use *on* with a street and *in* with a city.

▶ President Richard Nixon compared the United States ~~with~~^{to} a "pitiful, helpless giant."

Compare to means "regard as similar"; *compare with* means "to examine to find similarities or differences."

Many words in English are regularly used with a particular **preposition** to express a particular meaning. Throwing a ball *to* someone is different from throwing a ball *at* someone. Because many prepositions are short and not stressed or pronounced clearly in speech, they are often accidentally left out or mixed up in writing.

8. Comma splice

- ▶ Westward migration had passed Wyoming by, even the discovery of gold in nearby Montana failed to attract settlers.
- ▶ I was strongly attracted to her, she had special qualities.
- ▶ We hated the meat loaf, the cafeteria served it every Friday.

A **comma splice** occurs when only a comma separates **clauses** that could each stand alone as a sentence. To correct a comma splice, you can insert a semicolon or period, connect the clauses clearly with a word such as *and* or *because*, or restructure the sentence.

9. Missing or misplaced possessive apostrophe

- ▶ Overambitious parents can be very harmful to a ~~childs~~^{child's} well-being.
- ▶ Pedro Martinez is one of the ~~Met's~~^{Mets'} most electrifying pitchers.

To make a noun **possessive**, add either an apostrophe and an -s (*Ed's book*) or an apostrophe alone (*the boys' gym*).

10. Unnecessary shift in tense

- ▶ A few countries produce almost all of the world's illegal drugs, but addiction ~~affected~~^{affects} many countries.
^
- ▶ Priya was watching the great blue heron take off. Then she ~~slips~~^{slipped} and ~~falls~~^{fell} into the swamp.
^ ^

Verb tenses tell readers when actions take place: saying *Ron went* to school indicates a past action whereas saying *he will go* indicates a future action. Verbs that shift from one tense to another with no clear reason can confuse readers.

11. Unnecessary shift in pronoun

- ▶ When one first sees a painting by Georgia O'Keeffe, ~~you are~~ ^{one is} impressed by a sense of power and stillness.

An unnecessary **pronoun** shift occurs when a writer who has been using one pronoun to refer to someone or something shifts to another pronoun for no apparent reason.

12. Sentence fragment

NO SUBJECT

- ▶ Marie Antoinette spent huge sums of money on herself and her favorites. ^{Her extravagance} ~~And~~ helped bring on the French Revolution.
^

NO COMPLETE VERB

- ▶ The old aluminum boat ^{was} sitting on its trailer.
^

Sitting cannot function alone as the verb of the sentence. The auxiliary verb *was* makes it a complete verb.

BEGINNING WITH SUBORDINATING WORD

- ▶ We returned to the drugstore, ^{where} ~~where~~ we waited for our buddies.
^

A **sentence fragment** is part of a sentence that is written as if it were a whole sentence, with a capital letter at the beginning and a period, a question mark, or an exclamation point at the end. A fragment may lack a **subject**, a complete **verb**, or both. Other fragments may begin with a **subordinating conjunction**, such as *because*, and so depend for their meaning on another sentence. Reading your draft out loud, backwards, sentence by sentence, will help you spot sentence fragments.

13. Wrong tense or verb form

▶ By the time Ian arrived, Jill ^{had} died.
^

The verb *died* does not clearly state that the death occurred before Ian arrived.

▶ Iris has ^{gone} ~~went~~ to the store.
^

The verb *go* has irregular past-tense forms.

Errors of wrong **tense** include using a **verb** that does not clearly indicate when an action or a condition is, was, or will be completed - for example, using *walked* instead of *had walked*, or *will go* instead of *will have gone*. Errors of wrong form include confusing the forms of **irregular verbs** (such as *go*, *went*, and *gone*) or treating these verbs as if they followed the regular pattern - for example, using *beginned* instead of *began*.

14. Lack of subject-verb agreement

- ▶ A strategist behind the scenes ~~create~~^{creates} the candidate's public image.

The subject is the singular noun *strategist*, not *scenes*.

- ▶ Each of these designs ~~coordinate~~^{coordinates} with the others.

The subject is the singular pronoun *each*, not *designs*.

- ▶ There ~~is~~^{are} two main reasons that I want to become a lawyer.

The subject, *reasons*, is plural, so the verb is plural.

- ▶ My brothers or my sister ~~come~~^{comes} every day to see Dad.

Here, the noun closest to the verb is singular (*sister*). The verb must agree with that singular noun.

14. Lack of subject-verb agreement (continued)

▶ Johnson was one of the athletes who ~~was~~^{were} disqualified.
^

Here, *who* refers to *athletes*, so the verb is plural.

A **verb** must agree with its **subject** in **number** and in **person**. In many cases, the verb must take a form depending on whether the subject is **singular** or **plural**:
The old man is angry and stamps into the house, but
The old men are angry and stamp into the house. Lack of subject-verb agreement is often just a matter of carelessly leaving the -s ending off the verb or of not identifying the subject correctly.

15. Missing comma in a series

- ▶ Sharks eat mostly squid, shrimp, crabs, and other fish.

When three or more items appear in a series, many disciplines require them to be separated from one another with commas. Although newspapers and magazines do not use a comma between the last two items, the best advice in writing other than journalism is to use a comma because a sentence can be ambiguous without one.

16. Lack of agreement between pronoun and antecedent

- ▶ Each of the puppies thrived in ^{its}~~their~~ new home.
^

Many **indefinite pronouns**, such as *everyone* and *each*, are always **singular**.

- ▶ Either Nirupa or Selena will be asked to give ^{her}~~their~~ speech to the graduates.
^

When **antecedents** are joined by *or* or *nor*, the **pronoun** must agree with the closer antecedent.

- ▶ The team frequently changed ^{their}~~its~~ positions to get varied experience.
^

A **collective noun** can be either **singular** or **plural**, depending on whether the people are seen as a single unit or as multiple individuals.

16. Lack of agreement between pronoun and antecedent (continued)

▶ Every student must provide his ^{or her} own uniform.
^

With an antecedent that can refer to either a man or a woman, use *his* or *her*, *he* or *she*, and so on. When the singular antecedent refers to either a male or a female, you can also rewrite the sentence to make the antecedent and pronoun plural or to eliminate the pronoun altogether.

Pronouns must agree with their antecedents in **gender** (for example, using *he* or *him* to replace Abraham Lincoln and *she* or *her* to replace Queen Elizabeth) and in **number**.

17. Unnecessary comma(s) with a restrictive element

- ▶ People/who wanted to preserve wilderness areas/
opposed the plan to privatize national parks.

The reader needs the clause *who wanted to preserve wilderness areas* because it announces which people opposed the plan. The clause should not be set off with commas.

A **restrictive element** is essential to the basic meaning of the sentence. It is not set off from the rest of the sentence with commas.

18. Fused sentence

- ▶ The current was swift. ^{He} he could not swim to shore.
- ▶ Klee's paintings seem simple, ^{but} they are very sophisticated.
- ▶ ^{Although she} She doubted the value of meditation, she decided to try it once.

A **fused sentence** (also called a **run-on sentence**) is created when **clauses** that could stand alone as a sentence are joined with no punctuation or words to link them. Fused sentences must be either divided into separate sentences or joined by adding words or punctuation.

19. Misplaced or dangling modifier

MISPLACED MODIFIER

- ▶ *With binoculars, the*
~~The~~ hikers could see the eagles swooping and diving.
^
~~with binoculars.~~

Who was wearing the binoculars - the eagles?

Every **modifier** (whether a word, **phrase**, or **clause**) should be as close as possible to the word it describes or relates to. **Misplaced modifiers** may confuse your readers by seeming to modify some other element in the sentence.

DANGLING MODIFIER

- ▶ Looking down the sandy beach, *we see that*
people are tanning
themselves.
^

A **dangling modifier** hangs precariously from the beginning or end of a sentence, attached to no other part of the sentence. The element that the phrase modifies may exist in your mind but not in your draft. Each modifier must refer to some other element in the sentence.

20. Its/It's confusion

▶ The car is lying on ^{its} ~~it's~~ side in the ditch. ^{It's} ~~Its~~ a white 2006
Passat.

- Use **its** to mean “belonging to it”;
- Use **it's** only when you mean “it is” or “it has.”