



Common Errors

The following is a list of some common writing errors and examples of corrections. Remember, the Writing Center is a great place to catch and correct these errors, but students can and should utilize various UWC resources to learn to fix errors on their own.

These corrections conform to the standards set forth by the Modern Language Association (MLA) and will suit most English classes. However, in rare cases, other formats may change the rules, and students are expected to follow the rules of their varied disciplines. If in doubt, seek the help of the professor.

The Basics: Sentence Fragments, Run-ons, & Comma Splices

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

Ex.: 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.

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

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

Ex.: 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.*

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

Ex.: 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:

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

Nouns, Verbs, and Pronouns

Subject/Verb Agreement

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

Ex.: Whataburger is a wonderful fast food restaurant.

Ex.: Swans are dangerous birds when threatened.

When using compound subjects, collective nouns, and other complicated sentence structures, the rules change a bit. Here is a chart of some subject numbers and their corresponding verbs:

Subject	Verb	Example
Simple singular subject	Singular	Bacon is tasty.
Simple plural subject	Plural	Eggs are full of protein.
Compound subject connected by “and”	Plural	Eggs and bacon are a delicious combination.
Compound subject connected by “either... or” or “neither... nor”	Verb agrees with the closest subject	Either eggs or bacon is a great way to start the day.
Collective nouns functioning as a singular noun	Singular	The class starts each day in prayer.
Compound noun with singular meaning	Singular	The town bed-and-breakfast is a wonderful place to grab some breakfast.

See the UWC’s **Subject/Verb Agreement** handout for more information.

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.

Ex.: 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.”

Below is a list of some hard-to-identify pronouns and their numbers. This is not an exclusive list; for more pronoun examples, see the UWC’s **Pronouns** handout.

Noun	Number	Example
Everyone/everybody	Singular. Use singular pronouns (e.g. “Himself or herself”) instead of plural pronouns (“e.g. “Their”).	“Everyone wants his or her own water buffalo.” NOT “Everyone wants their own water buffalo.”

No one	Singular	“No one is here.”
They	Plural. “They” should never be used when the author does not specify the gender of a singular object.	“The students got what they wanted.” NOT “The student got what they wanted.”

Also, always check to make sure all pronouns have a single, clear antecedent. If it is unclear who or what the pronoun is referring to, replace the pronoun with its antecedent.

Instead of:

***Kurt and Kyle** changed **his** tire.*

Try:

***Kurt and Kyle** changed **Kyle’s** tire.*

Misplaced/Dangling Modifiers

When an adjective or adverb is placed so that it is unclear which word the adjective or adverb is describing, it is called a **misplaced modifier**.

*Ex.: The ogre **brandished** his club at the knights **following** him wildly.*

In this example, the word “wildly” could be describing the way the ogre brandishes his club or the way the knights are following. To avoid confusion, adjectives and adverbs should be placed as closely as possible to the noun or verb they modify.

*Ex.: The ogre wildly **brandished** his club at the knights following him.*

*Ex.: The ogre brandished his club at the knights wildly **following** him.*

Dangling modifiers happen when a descriptive modifier does not clearly describe the subject of the sentence.

*Ex.: **Aiming** the hose at the little flame, **the fire extinguisher** sputtered and gurgled to no avail.*

In this sentence, the fire extinguisher is said to be doing the aiming, but, of course, a fire extinguisher cannot aim itself. Therefore, the entity doing the aiming must be named.

*Ex.: **Aiming** the hose at the little flame, **Joey** cringed as the fire extinguisher sputtered and gurgled to no avail.*

Shifts in Voice

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:

*Ex.: 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:

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

First/Second Person Vs. Third Person

Scholarly writing usually uses **third person** pronouns to maintain an objective voice.

Instead of:

*Ex.: **My friends and I** believe that putting fruit in a cake should not be allowed. (First person)*

*Ex.: Eating too much cake will give **you** a stomachache. (Second person)*

Try:

*Ex.: **Some people** believe that putting fruit in a cake should not be allowed. (Third person)*

*Ex.: 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.

Ex.: (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.

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

See the UWC's **Converting First & Second to Third Person** handout for more information.

Research Papers

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.

For a more detailed explanation of a thesis statement, see the UWC's **Writing a Thesis** handout.

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.*

* Microsoft Word will denote this as an error. This is only an error when writing in British English. In American English, this is the proper punctuation for this sentence.

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.

*Paraphetical (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."¹ This is one reason why a writer should never let others' harsh words upset them.*

1. **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.

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

2. **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.

Ex.: "The beauty of a work is in the eye of the author"

3. 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.

*Ex. 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**.

*Ex.: A. U. Thor, in his groundbreaking... says that "The beauty of a work is in the eye of the **author**."¹*

4. 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.

For more specific tips on integrating quotes in **MLA**, **APA**, or **Turabian** formats, contact the UWC at (214)-333-5474.

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.

Various Grammar Mishaps

There, Their, and They're

These are NOT interchangeable.

"**There**" refers to a specific place.

*We will get **there** when we get **there**.*

"**Their**" is possessive; it indicates that something belongs to someone else.

*The Smiths take excellent care of **their** puppies.*

"**They're**" is a contraction of the words "They are." Since academic writing usually forbids the use of contractions, it is best to avoid using this one at all and instead spell out the full words.

***They are** sure to find that the reward will be worth their time.*

Parallelism

In a list of verbs, the verb endings can sometimes mismatch, creating an error of parallelism. **Parallelism** refers to keeping verbs in the same tense throughout a sentence.

*Ex.: Good ways to stay healthy include **avoiding** junk food, **eat** vegetables, and **exercise**.*

The first verb in this list of health tips starts with a verb that ends in -ing, but the verbs after it do not; thus, this sentence is not parallel. Make the verb endings match to maintain parallelism.

Ex.: Good ways to stay healthy include **avoiding** junk food, **eating** vegetables, and **exercising**.

Ex.: Doctors say to **avoid** junk food, **eat** vegetables, and **exercise** in order to stay healthy.

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.

Ex.: *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.

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

Contractions should never be used in academic writing without specific permission from the instructor. 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.

To find contractions in a paper, hit **Ctrl+F**, or **Command+F** on Macs, to pull up the Find textbox in Microsoft Word. Type an apostrophe (‘) into the box, and Word will highlight each apostrophe used. Check each apostrophe to determine whether it is used to create a possessive or a contraction, and make sure to edit out any contractions.

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.

Ex.: *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.

Ex.: *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.

Ex.: ***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.

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

For more examples, see the UWC’s **Avoiding Wordiness** handout.

General Editing Tips

Read the work out loud. If a sentence does not flow smoothly off the tongue, look more closely at the sentence and try to determine which error, if any, needs to be fixed. **Have a friend listen** as well to provide a second opinion.

Read the work backwards. Start with the last paragraph and work toward the first paragraph. This forces a student to look at each word and paragraph individually and make sure everything makes sense and nothing is misspelled.

Visit the UWC. A trained consultant will be able to spot errors student writers may not notice, and he or she can show the best ways to fix those errors. The UWC can be reached by calling 214-333-5474 or through the UWC website: <https://www.dbu.edu/writing-center/contact.html>.