

The Top Twenty Most Common Errors¹

Readers judge your writing by your control of certain conventions, which may change depending on your audience, purpose, and context for writing. Whether an instructor or a supervisor marks an error in an assignment will depend on personal judgments about the seriousness of the error. Some writing patterns identified here may be considered errors by some readers but stylistic options by others. Statistically, though, these twenty errors—identified in nationwide research—are the ones most likely to result in negative responses from readers.

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| 1. Wrong Word | 11. Missing comma with a nonrestrictive element |
| 2. Missing comma after an introductory element | 12. Unnecessary shift in verb tense |
| 3. Incomplete or missing documentation | 13. Missing comma in a compound sentence |
| 4. Vague pronoun reference | 14. Unnecessary or missing apostrophe (including <i>its/it's</i>) |
| 5. Spelling (including homonyms) | 15. Fused (run-on) sentence |
| 6. Mechanical error with a quotation | 16. Comma splice |
| 7. Unnecessary comma | 17. Lack of pronoun-antecedent agreement |
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| 9. Missing word | 19. Unnecessary or missing hyphen |
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While many people think of correctness as absolute, based on hard-and-fast unchanging rules, instructors and students know better. We know that there are rules but that rules change all the time. “Is it okay to use *I* in essays for this class?” asks one student. “My high school teacher wouldn’t let us.” “Will more than one comma error lower my grade?” asks another. Such questions show that rules clearly exist but that they are always shifting and thus need our ongoing attention.

Shifting standards do not mean that there is no such thing as correctness in writing—only that *correctness always depends on context*. Correctness is not so much a question of absolute right or wrong as it is a question of the way a writer’s choices are perceived by readers. As writers, we are all judged by the words we put on the page. We all want to be considered competent and careful, and writing errors work against that impression. The world judges us by our control of the conventions we have agreed to use, and we all know it. As Robert Frost once said of poetry, trying to write without honoring the conventions and agreed-upon rules is like playing tennis without a net.

A major goal of college writing is to help you understand and control the surface conventions of academic and professional writing. Since you already know most of these rules, the most efficient way to proceed is to focus on those that are still unfamiliar or puzzling.

To aid you in this process, we have identified the twenty error patterns most common among U.S. college students and list them here in order of frequency. These twenty errors are likely to cause you the most trouble, so it is well worth your effort to check for them in your writing. This “Top Twenty” includes brief explanations and examples of each error pattern.

¹ Adapted from Andrea A. Lunsford, *The St. Martin’s Handbook*, 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008), accessed August 20, 2013, <http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/smhandbook6e/Player/index.aspx>.

1. Wrong Word

- Scientific research, for them, takes ^{precedence} ~~prescience~~ over other kinds of sources.
 - *Prescience* means “foresight,” and *precedence* means “priority.”
- The employee suffered from a severe ^{allergy} ~~allegory~~ to peanuts.
 - *Allegory* is a spell checker’s replacement for a misspelling of *allergy*.
- The panel discussed the ethical implications ^{of} ~~on~~ the situation.

Wrong-word errors can involve using a word with the wrong shade of meaning, a word with a completely wrong meaning, or a wrong preposition or word in an idiom. Selecting the word from a thesaurus without knowing its meaning or allowing a spell checker to correct spelling automatically can lead to wrong-word errors, so use these tools with care. Memorize the standard usage of prepositions and idioms.

2. Missing comma after an introductory element

- **Determined to get the job done,** we worked all weekend.
- **These days,** financial security is still a pressing concern.

Readers usually need a small pause or yield sign—signaled by a comma—between an introductory word, phrase, or clause and the main part of the sentence. Use a comma after every introductory element. When the introductory element is very short, you do not always need a comma, but including it is always helpful and never wrong.

3. Incomplete or missing documentation

- Marjane Satrapi states, “When we’re afraid, we lose all sense of analysis and reflection.” ^{(263).}
- The page number of the print source for this quotation must be included.
- **According to one source, family values have always been the single most important factor in shaping the beliefs and behavior patterns of communities.** (“Values and Education”)
- The source must be identified (this online source has no page numbers).

Cite each source you refer to in the text, following the guidelines of the documentation style you are using. (The examples above follow MLA style). Omitting documentation can result in charges of plagiarism.

4. 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 are used.**
 - the airwaves
 - ^
 - In the original sentence, *they* could refer to the signals or to the airwaves.

Reference implied but not stated

- **The company prohibited smoking, which many employees resented.**
 - a policy
 - ^
 - What does *which* refer to, the policy or smoking? The editing clarifies what employees resented.

A pronoun should refer clearly 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, edit to make the meaning clear.

5. Spelling (including homonyms)

- **Ronald Reagan won the election in a landslide.**
 - Reagan
 - ^
- **Everywhere we went, we saw crowds of holiday shoppers mobbing the malls.**
 - Everywhere
 - ^

The most common misspellings today are those that spell checkers cannot identify. Spell checkers are most likely to miss homonyms, compound words incorrectly spelled as separate words, and proper nouns, particularly names. After you run the spell checker, proofread carefully for errors such as these.

6. Mechanical error with a quotation

- **“An infectious greed has seemed to grip much of our business community,” Alan Greenspan explains (*USA Today*).**
 - ^
 - The comma should be placed *inside* the quotation marks.

Follow conventions when using quotation marks with other punctuation. Always use quotation marks in pairs, and follow the guidelines of your documentation style for block quotations. Use quotation marks for titles of short works, but use italics for titles of long works, including books, journals, and websites. (Note: Conventions between the U.S.A. and the U.K. differ often, especially in regard to quotations, so you may expect to see differences in readings, but in your writing plan to follow Standard Edited American English.)

7. Unnecessary comma

Before conjunctions in compound constructions that are not compound sentences

- **This conclusion applies to the United States, and to the rest of the world.**
^
 - No comma is needed before *and* because it joins two phrases that modify the same verb, *applies*.

With restrictive elements

- **Many managers, of highly skilled employees, do not want them to skip professional development education.**
^
^
 - No comma is needed to set off the restrictive phrase *of highly skilled employees*, which is necessary to indicate which managers the sentence is talking about.

Do not use commas to set off restrictive elements that are necessary to the meaning of the words they modify. (Note: “restrictive” means that a word or phrase restricts or defines the meaning of the noun it modifies, making it essential to the meaning of the noun. If an element is essential to basic meaning, it is not set off with commas.) Do not use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet*) when the conjunction does not join parts of a compound sentence. Do not use a comma before the first or after the last item in a series, between a subject and verb, and between a verb and its object or complement, or between a preposition and its object.

8. Unnecessary or missing capitalization

- **Some Traditional Chinese Medicines containing Ephedra remain legal and profitable.**
traditional
medicines
ephedra
^
^
^

Capitalize proper nouns and proper adjectives, the first words of sentences, and important words in titles, along with certain words indicating directions and family relationships. Do not capitalize most other words. When in doubt, check a dictionary.

9. Missing word

- **The site foreman discriminated women and promoted men with less experience.**
against
^

Proofread carefully for omitted words, and be particularly careful not to omit words from quotations.

10. Faulty sentence structure

- **The information which high school athletes are presented with mainly includes information on what credits needed to graduate, and thinking about the college which athletes are trying to play for, and apply.**
High
they
^
colleges to try
^
how to apply
^

A sentence that starts with one kind of structure and then changes to another kind can confuse readers. Make sure that each sentence contains a subject and a verb, that subjects and predicates make sense together, and that comparisons have clear meanings. When you join elements (such as subjects or verb phrases) with a coordinating conjunction, make sure that the elements have parallel structures.

11. Missing comma with a nonrestrictive element

- **Samson, who was the chairman of the board, was the first to speak.**
 - The clause *who was the chairman of the board* does not affect the basic meaning of the sentence.

A nonrestrictive element gives information not essential to the basic meaning of the sentence. Use commas to set off a nonrestrictive element. (Note: “nonrestrictive” means that a word or phrase does not restrict or define the meaning of the noun it modifies, making it nonessential to the meaning of the noun. If an element is nonessential to basic meaning, it is parenthetical and set off with commas or parentheses. Remember, “nonrestrictive” is nonessential and parenthetical: surround it with commas.)

12. Unnecessary shift in verb tense

- **Mark was touring the manufacturing plant. Then he slips and falls into the vat.**

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

13. Missing comma in a compound sentence

- **James paid the new tax to the city, and his company became stagnant.**
 - Without the comma, a reader may think at first that James paid both the city and his company.

A compound sentence consists of two or more independent clauses that could each stand alone as a complete sentence. When the clauses are joined by a coordinating conjunction, use a comma before the conjunction to indicate a pause between the two thoughts.

14. Unnecessary or missing apostrophe (including *its/it's*)

- **Overambitious parents can be very harmful to a ~~childs~~ well-being.**
- **The truck is lying on ~~it's~~ side in the ditch. ~~Its~~ a white 2008 Chevrolet.**

To make a noun possessive, add either an apostrophe and an *-s* (*Ed's book*) or an apostrophe alone (*the employees' gym*). Do *not* use an apostrophe in the possessive pronouns *ours*, *yours*, and *hers*. Use *its* to mean *belonging to it*; use *it's* only when you mean *it is* or *it has*.

15. Fused (run-on) sentence

- Paul's letters seem simple, ^{but} they are very sophisticated.
- ^{Although she} ~~she~~ doubted the value of prayer, [^] she decided to try it during the crisis.

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

16. Comma splice

- I was strongly attracted to the job offer, ^{for} it was with a dynamic and well-managed company.
- We hated the meat loaf, ^{that} the company 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 with a conjunction such as *and* or *because*, or restructure the sentence.

17. Lack of pronoun-antecedent agreement

- Each of the salesmen thrived in ^{his} ~~their~~ new company.
- ^{All workers} ~~Every worker~~ must provide their own ^{uniforms} ~~uniform~~.

Pronouns must agree with their antecedents in gender (masculine or feminine) and in number (singular or plural). Many indefinite pronouns, such as *everyone* and *each*, are always singular. When a singular antecedent refers to a man or a woman, either rewrite the sentence to make the antecedent plural or to eliminate the pronoun, or use *his* or *her*, *he* or *she*, and so on. When antecedents are joined by *or* or *nor*, the pronoun must agree with the closer antecedent. A collective noun such as *team* or *management* can be either singular or plural, depending on whether the members are seen as a group or as individuals.

18. Poorly integrated quotation

- A 1980s study of what makes food appetizing ^{showed how color affects taste:} "Once it becomes apparent that the steak was [^] actually blue and the fries were green, some people became ill" (Schlosser 565).
- ^{According to Lars Eighner,} "Deep-sea exploration has serious drawbacks as a way of life" [^] (Eighner 383). Finding time to spend with family is especially tricky.

Quotations should fit smoothly into the surrounding sentence structure. They should be linked clearly to the writing around them (usually with a signal phrase) rather than dropped abruptly into the writing.

19. Unnecessary or missing hyphen

- **This report looks at fictional and real-life examples.**
 - A compound adjective modifying a noun that follows it requires a hyphen.
- **The buyers want to fix-up the house and resell it.**
 - A two-word verb should not be hyphenated.

A compound adjective that appears before a noun needs a hyphen. However, be careful not to hyphenate two-word verbs or word groups that serve as subject complements.

20. Sentence fragment

No subject

- **Marie Antoinette spent huge sums of money on herself and her favorites.**
Her economic extravagance
And helped bring on the French Revolution.
 ^

No complete verb

- **The old accounting files sitting in the basement.**
 were
 ^

Beginning with a subordinating word *where*

- **We returned to the meeting room, where we waited for the other staff members.**

A sentence fragment is part of a sentence that is written as if it were a complete sentence. Reading your draft out loud, backwards, sentence by sentence, will help you spot sentence fragments.