
Common Writing Mistakes and How to Fix Them**1. Sentence Fragments**

Sentence fragments are incomplete sentences or thoughts. A complete sentence needs to contain both a subject and predicate (a verb or action) in order to be an independent thought.

X Because her car was covered in ice.

The above sentence is a fragment because it cannot stand alone (it is a dependent clause) and needs further information in order to form a complete thought.

X Maria walked to school. Because her car was covered in ice.

The first sentence is *a complete independent sentence* because it contains a subject and a predicate. The second sentence is *a fragment* because it is a dependent clause. In order to be a complete independent thought, the second sentence needs to be connected to the clause before it.

✓ Maria walked to school because her car was covered in ice.

2. Run-On Sentences

Run-on sentences are the opposite of sentence fragments. These sentences contain more than one independent clause and are joined without the correct punctuation.

X My mother kept telling us to eat we were full.

To fix the above run-on sentence, you could separate the two clauses with a period, use a comma with a coordinating conjunction (such as “but”), or separate the clauses with a semicolon. The clearest way to fix a run-on sentence would be to separate the two clauses with a comma and add a coordinating conjunction.

✓ My mother kept telling us to eat, but we were full.

3. Wordiness

Wordiness occurs when an author uses too many words to express an idea. Using too many descriptors or “empty” words reduces the clarity of an argument and the conciseness of one’s writing. Remember, every word should have a specific purpose—do not use ten words when two will do.

X A concept that can be employed usefully, according to the ASC, is that of “assistive technology” (citation).

A more concise way of explaining the above idea is:

✓ The ASC states that “assistive technology” is a useful concept (citation).

4. Lack of Quote Integration

Quotes that are not introduced are considered “dropped.” There are three basic steps to the introduction and integration of a quote:

- 1) Introduce the quote:
 - ✓ According to the ASC, “commas are often misused” (citation).
- 2) Explain what the author means by the quote:
 - ✓ In this quotation, the ASC is explaining one of the most common punctuation errors.
- 3) Explain why the quote is important to your argument:
 - ✓ Since commas are often misused by university students, it would be beneficial to have thorough punctuation and grammar lessons taught in public schools.

5. Faulty Paragraph Structure

Each paragraph should contain one main idea, and include the following elements:

- 1) A **topic sentence** that tells the reader what the paragraph will be about;
- 2) **Evidence** to support your topic sentence; and
- 3) **Analysis** or **concluding remarks** to summarize and explain the importance of your point in the context of your thesis statement. This remark should also transition to the next paragraph.

If a paragraph has all of its pieces, each idea should be properly explained and analyzed. Do not introduce several ideas in one paragraph. Conversely, do not use multiple paragraphs to illustrate one main idea, as this can confuse the reader.

6. Comma Splices

A comma splice occurs when the author separates two independent clauses with only a comma. (Independent clauses are sentences that can stand alone.)

X The students started the experiment, all of the chemicals were outdated.

To fix a comma splice you can either:

- 1) Replace the comma with a period to separate the two independent clauses. (Be careful that your sentences do not sound “choppy.”)
 - ✓ The students started the experiment. All of the chemicals were outdated.
- 2) Use a semicolon to divide two independent but directly related clauses.
 - ✓ The students started the experiment; all of the chemicals were outdated.
- 3) Add a coordinating conjunction (joining word) to separate the clauses (e.g., for, and, nor).
 - ✓ The students started the experiment, but all of the chemicals were outdated.
- 4) Use a semicolon as well as a conjunctive adverb.
 - X The students started the experiment, however, the chemicals were outdated.
 - ✓ The students started the experiment; however, the chemicals were outdated.

7. Ambiguous pronouns/vague referents of pronouns

Sentences can become unclear if ambiguous pronouns or vague referents are present.

- 1) A **pronoun** is a word that takes the place of a noun. An **ambiguous pronoun** is when it is unclear which noun the pronoun was meant to replace.

Example:

Ambiguous pronoun: "The owner gave the dog her treats."

In this example it is unclear which noun *her* is supposed to represent, the dog or the owner. To solve this problem, an author can provide further explanation to make the sentence clearer.

Less Ambiguous: "The owner gave the dog treats from the cookie jar."

- 2) A **referent** is a word that refers to something else. A **vague referent** is when it is unclear what the referent is referring to. Examples of referents include: *which, that, or this*.

Example:

Vague Referent: "Bill played guitar daily. This caused him to have callused fingers."

In this example, *this* is vague because it does not directly connect to an action or noun.

Less Vague: "Bill played guitar daily. The instrument's rough strings caused him to have callused fingers."

8. Shifts in Verb Tense

Sentences or paragraphs can become confusing when the verbs shift in tense. Use consistent tenses in sentences and throughout paragraphs so the reader understands when the action is taking place.

Example:

A shift in tense: "When Charlie saw the tiger yesterday he sits on the bench and watched it play."

In this example *saw* and *watched* are in the past tense while *sits* is in the present tense.

Correct verb use: "When Charlie saw the tiger yesterday, he sat on the bench and watched it play."

9. Informal Tone

Academic writing is considered formal; that is, it does not contain contractions, slang, or colloquial (everyday) language.

Examples: don't = do not; sooner or later = inevitably; maybe = perhaps