Grammar Handbook

This handbook provides instruction and practice exercises for a variety of grammatical topics. The topics that feature the letter A with a circle around it are the ones that include an Adaptive Learning activity, which provides additional layers of instruction for students who may need additional help and practice.

The Parts of Speech

You may remember learning about the parts of speech in school. While you may not need to review every single part of speech, this section is useful so that when more complex grammatical topics are explained, you'll have refreshed knowledge of how nouns, verbs, prepositions, adjectives, adverbs, and all the other parts of speech function in a sentence.

Each of these parts of speech will be covered in more detail later in the course.

Nouns

Noun: a word that names a person, place, thing, or idea

> The cat chased the mouse.

A noun can be either a *subject* or an object. A subject is a noun that performs an action. In the above example, cat is the subject of the sentence. **Mouse** is also a noun, but it's not the subject of the sentence. Why? Mouse is not performing any action. Instead, something is being done to it: it's being chased. When a noun receives the action of the verb, it is called the *object* of the sentence.

Articles

Article: a word that indicates a noun

> I brought an apple and a banana to eat on the bus.

There are three articles: **a**, **an**, and **the**.

In the previous sentence, there are two articles that mark the nouns: **the** cat and **the** mouse. Both of the articles in the sentence are called *definite* articles because they indicate one specific thing—in the previous example, not just any cat, but one particular cat. Articles that do not point to a specific noun are called *indefinite* articles. There are two indefinite articles: **a** and **an**.

You'll learn more about nouns, noun phrases, and articles later in this module.

Pronouns

Pronoun: a word that substitutes for a common noun or a proper noun

For example: **he**, **she**, **it**, **them**, **they**, **I**, etc.

Look at the sentence below and decide what *them* refers to:

> After Nigel ate 53 pancakes in a pancake-eating competition, he couldn't look at *them* anymore.

Them refers to pancakes; likewise, **he** refers to Nigel. The word that a pronoun replaces is called the *referent* or *antecedent*. Sometimes, however, the referent is never named in the sentence. Read the sentence below:

> When interviewed after the contest, Nigel commented, "Anyone with self-discipline and guts could do it."

There are two pronouns in the sentences above: **anyone** and **it**. **It** obviously refers to the act of eating pancakes, but what does **anyone** refer to? This is a special kind of pronoun called an *indefinite pronoun*. An indefinite pronoun refers to an unspecified common noun. The indefinite pronouns you need to pay special attention to are the *singular indefinite pronouns* (SIPs), which generally fall into one of five categories. Use the table below to familiarize yourself with this category of pronouns.

bodies	ones	things	couples	uncategorized
anybody	anyone	anything	either	much
everybody	everyone	everything	neither	each
nobody	no one	nothing		every
somebody	someone	something		

I hate weather.

I hate cold weather.

In the second sentence, **cold** gives you more information about the noun (weather). Not only do adjectives modify nouns, but they may also modify a group of words.

Tim is an astute decision maker.

Here **astute** modifies **decision maker**, not just **decision** or **maker**. Likewise, decision modifies maker. It is important to understand that a word's grammatical identity depends on its function in a specific context: **decision** is a noun, but when used in this context, it becomes an adjective that modifies **maker**. Here is another example of a noun that becomes a modifier given its context.

I like extra cream [noun] in my coffee.

He has always loved cream [adjective] soda.

Adjectives

Adjective: a word that modifies a noun or pronoun

Adjectives answer the questions *What kind? Which one?* or *How many?* They make the nouns and pronouns more specific.

In the following sentence, the adjective *gentle* answers the question *What kind of tone?*

The caretaker spoke to me in a gentle tone.

In the next example, there are two adjectives that answer the question *Which one?*

> The blue purse is my purse.

In this sentence above, the adjectives are *blue* and *my*.

Finally, consider the sentence below.

> Ten thousand people attended the game.

Here, the adjective *ten thousand* answers the question *How many?*

Verbs

Verb: a word used to express an action or a state of being

For our purposes, verbs do one of two things: either they express the action that a noun performs or they express the state of being of a noun. Look at the examples below.

> Steve called his mother.

In this sentence, the subject (Steve) has actively dialed his mother. What about in the sentence below?

> The pencil is red.

In this sentence, the verb is the word is because it expresses the state of being of the pencil (the pencil is being defined by its redness).

There is also another type of verb of which you should be aware: the **helping verb** (sometimes called an auxiliary verb). A helping verb is sometimes combined with a main verb to express tense (had), possibility (could), obligation (should), or necessity (must). Helping verbs include the forms of do, be, and have. In the sentences below, notice the helping verbs (underlined) and the main verbs (italicized).

> My love <u>is</u> *growing*.
>
> My love <u>has been</u> *growing* for some time.
>
> My love <u>was</u> *growing* until it stopped.

Adverbs

Adverb: a word that modifies a verb, adjective, or another adverb

Adverbs answer the questions *How*? or *In what way*? Below is an example of an adverb modifying a verb:

> Beatrice **fondly** recalls her travels with Dante.

How did Beatrice recall her travels with Dante? **Fondly**. Next is an example of an adverb modifying an adjective:

> My uncle Timothy is **incredibly** generous with his money.

In this sentence, the word **incredibly** tells you exactly how generous Timothy was with his money; therefore, **incredibly** is an adverb that modifies an adjective, generous. How can an adverb modify another adverb? Consider the sentence below.

> I walked very slowly.

Here, the word **slowly** is modifying the verb walked. But what about the word **very**? The word **very** is giving you more information about the word **slowly**, which is an adverb. So in this sentence, you have an adverb modifying another adverb.

Prepositions

Preposition: a word that connects nouns or pronouns to other groups of words to show how they related in time, space, or other ways.

There are dozens of prepositions. Use the lists below to familiarize yourself with the most common ones.

about	around	beside	for	of	regarding	upon
above	as	between	from	off	since	with
across	at	behind	in	on	through	without
after	before	by	inside	onto	toward	
against	behind	down	into	out	under	
along	below	during	like	over	until	
among	beneath	except	near	past	up	

Notice how the **prepositions** (bolded) in the sentences below show where or when the nouns are located:

> The keys are **on** the desk.
>
> Cody sings **after** eating breakfast

A preposition takes an object, someone or something that the preposition connects to the rest of the sentence.

I [subject] will shove [verb] it in your face [object].

Together, the preposition and its object form a **prepositional phrase**. A prepositional phrase functions like a multi-word modifier, like an adjective or adverb, orienting objects or people in space or time.

Conjunction

Conjunction: a word that connects words, phrases, or clauses

There are two main types of conjunctions that you should be familiar with: **subordinating** conjunctions and **coordinating** conjunctions. First, coordinating conjunctions connect two equal sentence parts. Look at the two examples below and consider their differences and similarities.

> Example 1: I like Bob and Harry.

In this sentence, the word and connects Bob and Harry, who are grammatically equal because they are both proper nouns. The word and is a coordinating conjunction, because it is connecting two equal sentence parts.

> Example 2: I will marry you, and we will be happy.

Obviously, the word **and** is the coordinating conjunction in this sentence, as well. But here, it is connecting two independent clauses. In other words, both of those clauses could stand alone as separate sentences: I will marry you. We will be happy.

There are seven coordinating conjunctions that you should recognize: **for**, **and**, **nor**, **but**, **or**, **yet**, and **so**. Together, the first letters of all seven coordinating conjunctions form a word that will help you remember all of them: FANBOYS.

While a coordinating conjunction connects equal elements, a **subordinating** conjunction connects unequal sentence elements. Subordinating conjunctions introduce subordinate clauses, or clauses that cannot stand alone. The sentence below has a **bolded**

subordinating conjunction, an underlined subordinate clause, and an *italicized* independent clause.

> *I enjoy chocolate*, **whereas** you prefer vanilla.

In this example, the subordinating conjunction **whereas** connects the independent clause ("I enjoy chocolate") with the subordinating clause ("whereas you prefer vanilla"). Since independent and subordinate clauses are not equal, we can conclude that **whereas** is a subordinating conjunction.

Interjections

Interjection: a word that expresses a feeling but that isn't related grammatically to the rest of the sentence. Expressions of profanity are often interjections. Interjections are seldom used in academic, formal, or business writing but are frequently seen in novels as part of dialogue.

Example interjections include hey, oh, well, oh well, wow, son-of-gun, oh no

You should know what they are so that you can avoid them in academic writing.

> Well, the World Bank wasn't going to stand for that. | *Well* is the interjection in this sentence. You can see that it's unrelated to the rest of the sentence. You should also recognize that the tone of this sentence is too informal for research writing. Removing the interjection helps make the tone more formal, though the sentence may need to be revised further to make a better impression on readers.

Nouns and Noun Phrases

A noun is a word that indicates a person, place, or thing. Nouns that refer to specific people, places, or things are called proper nouns, and they are capitalized. All other nouns are common nouns.

Nouns can refer to one thing or more than one thing. If a noun refers to one thing, it is said to be singular. If it refers to more than one thing, it is plural. Usually, you can create a plural noun by adding an *-s* on the end, though some nouns have irregular plural forms, and some nouns (called non-count nouns) don't change form at all.

For example, we might see one bird (singular) or two, three, or more bird*s* (plural). On the other hand, you might have one child (singular) or three children (plural). Finally, you can have a grain of sand or enough sand to fill the desert. Regardless, *sand* doesn't need an -s to be plural, and it requires a singular verb.

Proper noun	Common noun	Compound noun	Gerund	Non-count noun
Lake Winnipesaukee Mount Washington George Washington	lake mountain man	fire truck brothers-in-law washing machines	running singing eating	sand flour money

Articles and Determiners

Articles (such as *the*, *an*, *a*) or other determiners (such as *this* and *seven*) are a special kind of adjective that many nouns **must** have in the context of a sentence to make the sentence grammatically correct. Determiners either identify a noun (*this* book, *any* book, *my* book, *that* book), or they quantify how many of those nouns exist (*three* books, *many* books).

There are three reasons that you need to understand determiners. First you need to understand whether the noun needs a determiner at all, and if so, which one. Secondly, determiners are often accidentally left out of sentences when they are needed for proper parallel structure.

Does a noun need a determiner?

Every singular count noun that is not a proper noun needs a determiner.

✘ Each student was given book. | This sentence is incorrect because the noun, book, is a count noun, and it is singular. It can be counted, so it needs a determiner to identify or quantify it in order for the sentence to be correct.

✔ Each student was given *a* book. | *A* is an article, a type of general determiner, and it satisfies the requirement that singular count nouns have a determiner.

✔ Each student was given books. | Plural nouns do not need determiners, though they may have them, depending on the context.

✘ The angry citizens convened on the Fifth Avenue. | This sentence is incorrect because proper nouns generally cannot take determiners. Fifth Avenue is a proper noun.

✔ The angry citizens convened on Fifth Avenue. | Here, the proper noun is correctly written without a pronoun.

Citizens had been reduced to eating only the rice for dinner. | This sentence sounds strange out of context because rice is not a count noun. A determiner is not needed, unless the author of the sentence means to indicate a specific meaning.

✔ The citizens had some rice for dinner. | *Some* is one of the few determiners that can be used with non-count nouns.

✔ Clarity of communication is a skill that all teachers should possess. | In this sentence, *skill* is a count noun. A determiner is needed because the word is being used in a way that suggests that clarity of communication is just one of many individual skills the sentence could refer to.

✔ Teachers should be trained to recognize and encourage innate skill. | This sentence uses *skill* as a non-count noun. Many abstract nouns—nouns that refer to abstract concepts such as *love*, *hate*, *innovation*, *freedom*, and *bedside manner* are non-count nouns.

Which determiner should I use?

✔ Each student was given *a* book. | *A* is an article, and it is the most general determiner. You can use *a* when you mean to ascribe no specific characteristics to the book. In this research study, the book could have been any book; it is understood that the specific book was not important.

✘ Each patient was given operation. | This sentence is incorrect because the noun, operation, is a count noun, and it is singular. It can be counted, so it needs a determiner to identify or quantify it in order for the sentence to be correct.

✔ Each patient was given *an* operation. | *An* is an article that serves exactly the same purpose as *a*, except that *an* is used when the noun starts with a vowel sound.

✘ The team considered forming *a* NGO. | This sentence is incorrect because the noun, NGO, starts with a vowel sound "en," even if it doesn't start with a vowel.

✔ The team considered forming *an* NGO | *An* is an article that serves exactly the same purpose as *a*, except that *an* is used when the noun starts with a vowel sound.

✔ Each student was given *the* book. | *The* is an article, as well, and it is also relatively general, though it' more specific than *a*. You can use *the* when you mean to suggest that the book you have is one that the reader or listener is expecting you to be speaking about. For instance, you may have already written about the book in the previous sentence.

✔ Each student was given *his or her* book. | *His* and *her* are both determiners, even though they are also personal pronouns. You can probably see now that determiners got their name because they determine *which* of a common noun you are talking about. In this case, the book belongs to each child.

✔ Each student was given *seven* books. | *Seven* is a determiner. This noun, books, is plural, so it doesn't need a determiner, but the determiner just serves to quantify the noun.

✔ Each student was given *some* books. | *Some* is also a determiner that quantifies, even though it is less precise than a specific number.

✖ Each student was given *those the* books. | Both *those* and *the* are determiners. Two determiners may not be used together unless one of them is a number.

✔ Each student was given *those* books. | You must choose one of the determiners above.

✖ Each student was given *seven those* books. | This sentence is incorrect. Review the revision below to see why.

✔ Each student was given *those seven* books. | Both *those* and *seven* are determiners. A number can be used with other determiners, but the number must come after the determiner.

Parallel structures

The other instance in which writers run into trouble is with using determiners in parallel structures. Though you may know without thinking that a noun needs a determiner, sometimes longer sentences and phrases can make you forget to use it.

✖ The children were required to have either a croissant or bagel for breakfast. | This sentence is incorrect because it is missing a determiner.

✔ The children were required to have either a croissant or *a* bagel for breakfast. | Because *either . . . or* sets up a parallel structure, a determiner must be used for both nouns.

✔ The children were required to have either a croissant or *three* bagels for breakfast. | Any determiner can be used; the one you pick will depend on the meaning.

✘ The children were asked to gather a book, bat, and ball. | This sentence is incorrect because the nouns, joined in parallel by the coordinating conjunction, *and*.

✔ The children were asked to gather a book, a bat, and a ball. | This sentence is correct because the articles are used in each parallel section.

Pronouns

A **pronoun** is a word that takes the place of a noun. Pronouns allow us to speak and write smoothly without needlessly repeating the same noun. The noun that a pronoun replaces or to which it refers is called the **antecedent**. Pronouns must agree with their antecedents in number, gender, and person.

A personal pronoun takes the place of the name of a person.

I / me / we / you / he / him / she / they / them / it

Mitchell worked hard all day. I called him that evening, but he had fallen asleep. | *Him* and *he* are personal pronouns whose antecedent is *Mitchell*. A singular masculine noun in the third person, for example, must use the pronoun his, he, or him.

A possessive pronoun shows ownership.

our / your / his / her / hers / their / theirs / its / whose

My car is a piece of junk; its hood is dented, and the side panels are falling off. | *Its* is a possessive pronoun whose antecedent is *car*. An inanimate object gets the pronoun *its*. Remember not to confuse *its* with *it's*, the contraction that stands for *it is*.

A reflexive pronoun is used only when the same noun is both the subject and the object of the sentence.

myself / ourselves / yourself / yourselves / himself / herself / itself / themselves

Ione got herself ready for the interview.	*Herself* is a reflexive pronoun whose antecedent is *Ione*.

A relative pronoun takes the place of a person, place, thing, or idea, and it begins a clause that relates some additional information about its antecedent.

who / whom / this / that / these / those / which / whose

Daniel gave a lecture that was filled with unusual and interesting information.	*That* is a relative pronoun whose antecedent is *lecture*. The relative pronoun introduces the idea that the lecture "was filled with unusual and interesting information."

> An elderly village blacksmith was teaching his trade to an apprentice. "Do exactly what I tell you," the blacksmith said. "I'll heat this iron until it's red hot. Then I'll put it on the anvil. When I nod my head, you strike it with the hammer." The young man did exactly as he was told. *He* is now the village blacksmith.

Pronoun Reference

A pronoun works a bit like a shadow: it suggests the subject without actually naming it, but pronouns can be confusing as well. If your reader isn't sure about the pronoun's antecedent, he or she may get confused and have to read the sentence again to figure out what the pronoun is referring to. Whether the shadow to the right is a man with a theater program in his hand flagging a cab or a man creeping up behind you in a dark alley matters a lot! So make sure your antecedents are clear. This section will outline some rules for ensuring clear pronoun reference.

Ambiguous reference

Avoid ambiguous pronoun reference. The reader should be able to tell immediately which antecedent a pronoun refers to.

✖ Mary wrote to Sue every day while she was in the hospital. | The pronoun reference in this sentence is unclear. The problem is that *she* could refer to either Mary or Sue. It's best to revise as in the sentence below:

✔ When Mary was in the hospital, she wrote to Sue every day. | Here the reader does not have to guess at the meaning. It is clear that Mary was in the hospital and that *she* wrote every day.

Ambiguous pronoun reference usually crops up when a sentence has two subjects of the same gender, and the problem can usually be fixed if the writer names one of the subjects and rearranges the sentence to avoid awkward repetition of the subject.

✖ Women love receiving flowers, even if they are past their prime. | The pronoun reference in this sentence is unclear. The problem is that *they* could refer to either the women or the flowers. The women in your life would probably be happier with you if you revised the sentence:

✔ Even if flowers are past their prime, women love receiving them. | Now the reader does not have to guess at the meaning; it is clear that the flowers are past their prime rather than the women.

✖ Bernie wanted to go to Phil's party, but his mother wouldn't allow it. | In this sentence, the pronoun *his* should refer to Bernie because he is the subject of the first independent clause. If the writer meant to refer to Phil, the pronoun is ambiguous.

✔ Bernie wanted to go to Phil's party, but Phil's mother wouldn't allow it. | The sentence resolves the ambiguity by using *Phil's* instead of the pronoun *his*.

✖ Nurses are taking on more roles traditionally associated with doctors, but they haven't seen changes to their pay. | In this sentence *they* could refer to doctors, nurses, or both groups. The pronoun should be changed to eliminate ambiguity.

✔ Nurses are taking on more roles traditionally associated with doctors, but neither group has seen changes to their pay. | This sentence resolves the ambiguity by using *neither group* instead of *they*.

Vague reference

Avoid vague pronoun reference. When you use the word *this* or similar pronouns like *it* or *that*, be certain the antecedent is clear. If the antecedent does not come directly after the pronoun, the pronoun will be assumed to refer to the closest noun. If it does not, the reference will be vague.

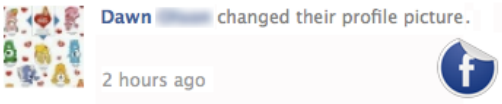
✘ Many drivers text while operating a car. This could be a problem. | The antecedent for the pronoun *this* is not clear. If you didn't know the context, you wouldn't know what the exact problem is. The cell phone might interfere with the car's operation, or the writer of the sentence could be upset that all drivers don't text while operating a car. It's better to make the antecedent clear.

✔ Many drivers text while operating a car. This lack of focus can cause problems. | Here, the word *this* modifies the new named problem *lack of focus*. Now, the reader can easily tell what is meant by *this*.

Agreement problems

Pronouns must agree with their antecedents in number and gender. For instance, a singular masculine noun in the third person, for example, must use the pronoun *his* or *him*.

Do you recognize the error in the image to the right?



The sentence should say "Dawn changed *her* profile picture," but Facebook uses *their* instead of *her* because it doesn't know the gender of this person. However, using a plural pronoun for a singular antecedent is grammatically incorrect!

✘ Every mailman wants an income that supports their lifestyle. | *Every mailman* is a singular subject. The pronoun *their* is plural. There is no agreement between the antecedent and the pronoun here.

✔ Every mailman wants an income that supports his lifestyle. | Here, we have a singular noun, *mailman*, and a singular pronoun, *his*. Both are in the third person. The above sentence is now correct, assuming every "mailman" is a man, but we shouldn't assume. Try the revision below:

✔ Letter carriers want incomes that will support their lifestyles. | This example pluralizes the subject, so it is now grammatically appropriate.

Consistency

Be consistent in your use of person within the same sentence. Avoid switching between first, second, and third person.

✖ Almost everyone eats popcorn when you're watching a movie. | *Everyone* is a third person pronoun. *You're* is a second person pronoun. This sentence is incorrect because these pronouns don't agree in person.

✔ Almost everyone eats popcorn when he or she is watching a movie. | Here we have a third person pronoun, *everyone*, and use third person pronouns of both genders, *he or she*.

Keep in mind that in research writing, you should avoid using the pronoun *you* altogether. When a writer uses *you*, he or she risks putting words into people's mouths, which sometimes leads to the writer putting his or her own foot in his or her own mouth. You might imagine a reader who reads the sentence above thinking, "I can't afford to eat popcorn at the theater; if this writer is making such sweeping generalizations, can I trust the argument at all?" To be diplomatic, it's better to revise:

✔ Many people eat popcorn when they are watching a movie | This sentence keeps the pronouns consistent, and it avoids using *you*.

Independent and Dependent Clauses

An independent clause is a group of words that can stand alone to form a grammatically complete sentence. A complete sentence consists of a subject and a predicate, and it is a complete thought.

The following is an example of an independent clause:

The students toured Europe for a month. | The subject is *the students*, and the predicate is *toured Europe for a month*.

A dependent clause, also called a subordinate clause, has a subject and a verb, but it depends —as the name suggests—on the independent clause to make sense. Dependent clauses do not express a complete thought on their own.

Use the following chart to review the definitions of independent clauses and dependent clauses.

Independent Clause	Dependent Clause
An independent clause is a group of words that stand alone to form a grammatically complete sentence.	A dependent clause, also called a subordinate clause, has a subject and a verb, but it depends—as the name suggests—on the independent clause to make sense. Dependent clauses do not express a complete thought on their own.
Example: I dislike social media.	Example: Because I dislike social media, I don't have a Facebook page. In the sentence above, the dependent clause *because I dislike social media* depends on the independent clause *I don't have a Facebook page* to complete the thought.

Troubleshooting: Clauses and Phrases

Do not confuse clauses with phrases. A clause—whether it is independent or dependent—has a subject and a verb. A phrase (such as prepositional phrases covered in the previous module) does not have a subject and a verb. For example, *after the game*, *down the sidewalk*, and *in spite of heavy rain* are phrases. However *because I dislike social media*, *since I cannot hear well*, and *before I took the test* are all dependent clauses, because they have a subject and a verb.

Fragments

Beware of sentence fragments. A sentence fragment is an incomplete sentence missing a subject, a verb, or a complete thought.

No main subject

A sentence must have a main subject in order to express a complete thought.

✖ Running to the store. | *Running*, would be the main verb, if it were *am running*. It's only a partial verb phrase, and this sentence doesn't have a main subject, so it's not a complete sentence.

✔ I am running to the store. | This is a complete sentence because it has a main subject *I* and a main verb, *am running*.

✔ Running to the store was difficult in the cold. | In this sentence, *running to the store* is the subject, and the main verb is *was*. This is a complete sentence as well.

✘ Ran into her old boss. | *Ran* is the main verb, but a main subject is missing.

✔ Ellie ran into her old boss. | *Ellie* is the main subject *ran* is the main verb. This is a complete sentence.

✘ Chopped up the vegetables for the salad. | *Chopped up* is the main verb, but a main subject is missing.

✔ Marcus chopped up the vegetables for the salad. | *Marcus* is the main subject, and the main verb is *chopped up*.

No main verb

A sentence must have a finite verb, a verb that places the action or state of being in time (past, present, future, conditional) in order to express a complete thought.

✘ A complicated problem with no ready solution. | This sentence is a fragment because it lacks a finite verb

✔ A complicated problem with no ready solution is likely to be oversimplified in the news | In order to correct this fragment, you need to introduce a finite verb into the sentence. Here, *is* solves the problem.

Often, a participle or other verbal can be confused for a finite verb because participles are adjectives created from verb forms. But participles can't be the main verb of the sentence.

✘ A meteor shower radiating across the sky. | *A meteor shower* is the subject, but a main verb is missing. *Radiating* is a verb form, but without a *to be* verb, words that end in *-ing* as *radiating* does in this example are in participle form. A finite verb, rather than just a participle is necessary in the construction of an independent clause, so you need to introduce a finite verb into the sentence above to make it complete. *Radiating* is describing the meteor shower rather than providing a main verb for the main subject.

✔ A meteor shower is radiating across the sky. | This sentence is complete because *is radiating* forms the main verb. This sentence now contains a complete thought.

✘ Returning to school on a hot summer day. | This sentence is obviously a dependent clause because it lacks a subject and finite verb to make it an independent clause. There are two ways to fix the above sentence, and they depend on how you treat the word *returning*.

✔ Returning to school on a hot summer day is a good omen for the school year. | Here, we assume that **returning** is a verbal, a verb that functions like a noun or modifier. In this correction, returning functions like the subject of the sentence.

✔ Returning to school on a hot summer day, Brienne was happy to be back with her friends. | This sentence treats *returning* like an introductory clause that precedes the subject's appearance.

✘ The Starbucks on the corner. | *The Starbucks* is the subject, but a main verb is missing.

✔ The Starbucks on the corner closes at five o'clock. | This is a complete sentence because it has a subject and a verb, *closes*.

No complete thought

Sentences must express a complete thought. A sentence may have a subject and a verb but still be a fragment. A subordinate (also called dependent) clause resembles the pattern of a sentence. That is, it has both a subject and a verb. However, it begins with a word that indicates it is subordinate to another sentence. A subordinate clause is a fragment if it is not attached to a complete sentence.

✘ Even though they were going to the gym later. | This subordinate clause has a subject, *they*, and a verb, *were going*. However, it begins with a subordinating conjunction, *even though*, so it is a fragment.

✔ Even though they were going to the gym later, they went for a run with their dog. | This sentence combines the subordinate phrase with a complete sentence because the subordinate phrase cannot stand on its own.

✔ They went for a run with their dog even though they were going to the gym later. | This sentence shows another way that dependent clauses can be joined to independent clauses.

See a list of subordinating conjunctions below. When you see these, be sure that your sentence is subordinated to a complete sentence. You may need to review complex sentence formation if you are having trouble pairing subordinate clauses with independent clauses.

Subordinating conjunctions and relative pronouns

Subordinating conjunctions:

after	because	even though	in order that	only if	unless
although	before	every time	just in case	rather than	until
as soon as	by the time	if	now that	since	when
even if	in case	once	though	while	

Relative pronouns:

that	what	whatever	who	whose
which	whichever	whoever	whomever	whom

Repairing fragments

You can repair a fragment by making it part of the sentence before or after it.

Examples of how to repair sentence fragments:

✘ Sarah and Barb ate a huge lunch. Even though they were going to the gym later. | *Sarah and Barb ate a huge lunch* is a complete sentence. *Even though they were going to the gym later* is a fragment that begins with a subordinating conjunction.

✔ Sarah and Barb ate a huge lunch even though they were going to the gym later. | Combining the fragment with the complete sentence creates a complete thought.

✔ Even though they were going to the gym later, Sarah and Barb ate a huge lunch. | You can reverse the order of the phrases if you want to emphasize a different part of the sentence.

✔ Sarah and Barb were going to the gym later. | You can turn the fragment itself into a complete sentence by eliminating the conjunction.

If you proofread your writing by starting at the end of your piece, reading from the last sentence to the first, you will be able to recognize fragments more easily.

Run-On Sentences: Fused Sentences

Independent clauses can only be joined in specific ways. If you are not careful when you combine ideas, you may end up with a run-on sentence.

A **fused sentence** is a type of run-on sentence. In a run-on sentence, two complete sentences are improperly joined. A fused sentence consists of two independent clauses that have been linked together, or fused, without either 1) a semicolon or 2) a coordinating conjunction and a comma.

✘ America is falling behind in education recently students in Shanghai outscored all countries on an achievement test. | The first independent clause is *America is falling behind in education*. The second independent clause is *Recently students in Shanghai outscored all countries on an achievement test*. Each independent clause can stand alone as a separate sentence. Yet they are fused together in a single sentence.

✔ America is falling behind in education; recently students in Shanghai outscored all countries on an achievement test. | This sentence is correct because the two independent clauses are joined by a semicolon.

✘ The President called this our "Sputnik moment" we must improve our educational system. | The first independent clause is *The President called this our "Sputnik moment."* The second independent clause is *We must improve our educational system*. Each independent clause can stand alone as a separate sentence. However, here they are fused together in a single sentence.

✔ The President called this our "Sputnik moment"; we must improve our educational system. | This sentence is correct because the two independent clauses are joined with a semicolon.

✘ My battery is dead I haven't even had a chance to look for jumper cables | This is a fused sentence. The two complete sentences are *My battery is dead*. and *I haven't even had a chance to look for jumper cables*.

✔ My battery is dead, and I haven't even had a chance to look for jumper cables. | This sentence is correct. The two complete sentences are joined by a comma and a coordinating conjunction, *and*. Remember the coordinating conjunction! If you just use a comma, you have written an incorrect comma splice!

Run-On Sentences: Comma Splices

Independent clauses can only be joined in specific ways. If you are not careful when you combine ideas, you may end up with a run-on sentence.

A comma splice is another type of run-on sentence. Comma splices join two independent clauses incorrectly by using a comma without a coordinating conjunction.

Writers often make this mistake because they confuse dependent clauses and independent clauses. It's okay for an independent clause to be joined with a dependent clause with only a comma, but it's grammatically incorrect to join two independent clauses with a comma.

✖ It began raining, we never stopped running. | These are both independent clauses, so they may not be joined with only a comma.

✔ It began raining. We never stopped running. | You can make each independent clause into a separate sentence that starts with a capital letter and ends with a period.

✔ It began raining; we never stopped running. | If the ideas in the two independent clauses are closely related, you can use a semicolon.

✔ Although it began raining, we never stopped running. | The second clause is still an independent clause, but the first phrase is now clearly a dependent clause—it's clear that it relies on the subject of the independent clause because it doesn't have one of its own.

✔ It began raining, and we never stopped running. | You may also fix a comma splice by adding a comma and a coordinating conjunction. In this case, both clauses can remain independent, but the relationship between them is clearly marked by *and*, which shows that they were both happening at the same time.

In order to identify and fix comma splices, you must first be able to distinguish a dependent clause from an independent clause. An independent clause is a group of words that contains a subject and a finite verb that can stand alone. For example, "Ahmad spoke." Although it may appear short, this is a sentence because it has both a subject (Ahmad) and a verb that places it in a time frame (spoke, which is the past tense of speak). Dependent clauses may contain a subject and a finite verb, but they cannot stand alone because they exist to modify a necessary independent clause.

✖ This year was the hottest on record in many parts of the world, there are still many people who don't have access to temperature-controlled dwellings. | The first independent clause is *This year was the hottest on record in many parts of the world*. The second independent clause is *There are still many people who are don't have access to temperature-controlled dwellings*. This sentence is grammatically incorrect because two independent clauses are joined with a only a comma.

✔ Although this year was the hottest on record in many parts of the world, there are still many people who do not have access to temperature-controlled dwellings. | The first sentence is now dependent on the second for its meaning. *Do not have* is the main, finite verb of this sentence, and the dependent clause at the beginning of the sentence sets the context for the independent clause.

✖ This year was the hottest on record in many parts of the world, there are still many people who don't have access to temperature-controlled dwellings. | The first independent clause is *This year was the hottest on record in many parts of the world*. The second independent clause is *There are still many people who are don't have access to temperature-controlled dwellings*.

✔ This year was the hottest on record in many parts of the world, but there are still many people who do not have access to temperature-controlled dwellings. | The two sentences are now joined with a coordinating conjunction, *but*, and a comma.

✖ The temperatures finally returned to normal this fall, we are all grateful for the beautiful weather. | The first independent clause is *The temperatures finally returned to normal this fall*. The second independent clause is *We are all grateful for the beautiful weather*. This run-on sentence has a comma, but a coordinating conjunction such as *and* is missing.

✔ The temperatures finally returned to normal this fall, and we are all grateful for the beautiful weather. | This sentence is correct because the two independent clauses are linked with a comma and a coordinating conjunction, *and*.

Remember that it is incorrect to separate main verbs from the subject of the sentence with a comma.

✖ Tom went to the store, and bought some bread | This sentence is incorrect because the subject of the sentence is *Tom*, and the main verbs are *went* and *bought*.

✔ Tom went to the store and bought some bread. | This sentence is correct because the main verbs are not separated from the main subject by a comma.

✔ Tom went to the store, and he bought some bread. | This sentence is correct because the second phrase now has its own subject, the pronoun *he*. In this case, the comma is needed to prevent a comma splice error.

Commas

When to Use a Comma

1. Commas are often used to separate information from the rest of the sentence. Specifically:
   a. Before a joining word that joins two independent clauses to make a sentence. **(Coordinating conjunction)**:

      I read the book, *but* I can't remember any of it.

   b. After an introductory phrase and around a transitional phrase:

      At last, the two sides agreed on the rules for the debate.

      The debate, *however*, would not take place any time soon.

   c. To set off an item that emphasizes a difference in the sentence **(contrasting elements)**:

      It was Allen, *not his brother*, who ran the store.

   d. To set off a noun that has the same meaning as the noun right next to it **(nonessential appositive)**:

      Mr. Riley, *my favorite coach*, helped me win the championship.

2. Commas are also used between three or more items in a list.

   Edwina is a talented athlete who excels at *field hockey*, *track*, and *swimming*.

3. Commas are used between two or more adjectives that can each independently describe a noun.

   The *funny*, *fearless* hero triumphed every time.

When Not to Use a Comma

1. With phrases that limit the meaning of the words they describe (restrictive elements):

   ✗ Yoko decided to adopt the puppy, that had black spots.

   ✓ Yoko decided to adopt the puppy that had black spots.

2. Between subject and verb, even when the subject is long:

   ✗ The Introductory to Russian Language class, met twice a week.

   ✓ The Introductory to Russian Language class met twice a week.

3. Between verbs or prepositions and the nouns they act on (their objects):

   ✗ The silver rocket shot, through the sky.

   ✓ The silver rocket shot through the sky.

4. Between two clauses that can each be a sentence:

   ✗ The plant is dry, it needs water.

   ✓ The plant is dry. It needs water.

Verbs

A verb is a word or group of words that indicate an action, a state of being or a condition. The base form of a verb usually has 'to' preceding it; this base form is referred to as the infinitive, which is conjugated depending on how the verb will be used in the sentence.

Most verbs are action verbs, which means they indicate some sort of action.

Action verbs
to run, to think, to love, to write, to speak, to draw *Bennett runs in the park.*

Some verbs indicate a state of being or seeming. These include *to be* verbs that are forms of the word *be*. They are often used as linking verbs.

Verbs that indicate being	Verbs that indicate seeming
to be (am, are, is, was, were)	to seem, to taste, to feel
I am an excellent student.	*The cake tastes good.*
Trudy is a fine tennis player.	*I feel fine.*
	Fred appears tired.

A **verb phrase** consists of two or more words that together indicate an action, a state of being or a condition. In a verb phrase, the main verb is usually paired with an auxiliary, or "helping," verb that agrees with the tense of the sentence and the number of the noun.

Carlos is running. | The verb phrase is *is running.* The use of the auxiliary verb *is* indicates that Carlos is currently doing the action.

Fletcher was singing at the opera. | The use of the auxiliary verb *was* indicates that the action took place in the past. If the action will occur in the *future*, the sentence would read "Fletcher will be singing at the opera."

Verbs that need a preposition to complete their meaning are called phrasal verbs.

Kendra and Paul made up after arguing for two weeks. | The words *made up* indicate an action that is different in meaning from either *made* or *up.* Together, *made up* forms a phrasal verb.

Sebastian took over the company last month. | The words *took over* indicate an action that is different from *took* or *over.*

Characteristics of Verbs

Verbs have some basic characteristics that determine the form they take and how you use them in a sentence.

Verbs depend on...

Number and person

A verb must agree with the noun associated with it. If the noun is singular, the verb must also be singular. If the noun is plural, the verb must be plural.

✘ The bus are old. | *Are* is the incorrect verb to use in this instance because *bus* is a singular noun.

✔ The bus is old. | The linking, or auxiliary, verbs *is* is correct in this instance because *bus* is singular, and *is* should be used for singular nouns.

✘ The buses is old. | *Is* is the incorrect verb to use in this instance because *buses* is a plural noun.

✔ Ron pitches the ball. | *Pitches* is the correct verb to use in this instance because *Ron* is a singular noun.

✘ Ron pitch the ball. | *Pitch* is incorrect in this instance because *pitch* should be used for plural nouns, and *Ron* is singular.

Regular verbs have an -s when the third person noun doing the action is singular, and the -s is removed when the third person noun they are paired with is plural. Not all verbs are regular, though; there are hundreds of **irregular verbs**, which change their spelling instead of following the expected conjugation forms.

	To talk (regular verb)		To be (irregular verb)		To have (irregular verb)	
Present tense	**Singular**	**Plural**	**Singular**	**Plural**	**Singular**	**Plural**
1st person	I talk	We talk	I am	We are	I have	We have
2nd person	You talk	You talk	You are	You are	You have	You have
3rd person	He (she, it) talks	They talk	He (she, it) is	They are	He (she, it) has	They have

Form

Each verb has a specific set of forms that you will use to create the verb phrase that you use in a sentence to express action that happened to a specific person in a specific time.

Verb form	Regular verb	Irregular verb	To be verb
Base form	talk	run	be
Past tense	talked	ran	was/were
Past participle	talked	run	been
Present participle	talking	running	being
-s form for simple present	talks	runs	is

You may have working knowledge of these forms already, but it's good to know what these forms are called when you need to create a more complicated tense form. The next tab will explain how to use these forms to create verb tenses.

Tense

A verb's tense indicates when the action took place. For example, the simple past describes an action that took place at a specific time and is no longer happening; the simple present describes an action that is going on right now; the simple future describes an action that hasn't yet taken place.

✔ Beckett pitched yesterday. | *Pitched* is the correct verb to use in this instance because *yesterday* indicates that this activity took place in the past.

✘ Beckett pitch yesterday. | *Pitch* is incorrect here because, as was mentioned above, *yesterday* indicates that this activity took place in the past. Even though we don't always pronounce the *-ed* at the end of past tense words, it's important to know when the *-ed* form should be used.

✔ Lester pitches every day. | *Pitches* is the correct verb to use in this instance because *every day* indicates that this activity is currently taking place.

✔ Wakefield will pitch tomorrow. | *Will pitch* is the correct verb form to use in this instance because *tomorrow* indicates that this activity will take place in the future.

Sometimes time is more complicated than just past, present, and future. For example, an action might have taken place over a long period of time and is now finished. Or it might have taken place over a long period of time and is still going on. The perfect, progressive, and perfect progressive verb forms indicate more complicated time descriptions. See the verb tense chart with examples below.

	Regular verb	Irregular verb	To be verb
Simple present	She calls me every day.	She runs whenever she can.	She is a liar.
Simple past	She called yesterday.	She ran last week.	She was full of stories.
Simple future	She will call you tomorrow.	She will run once she gets back from vacation.	She will be happy to see you.
Present progressive	She is calling to see if you want to meet her out.	She is running as we speak.	She is being a little touchy today
Past progressive	She was calling for hours.	She was running every day last week.	She was being her usual cheerful self.
Future progressive	She will be calling to talk about the situation.	She will be running as soon as her leg heals.	By the time we reach our final destination, she will be fussy.
Present perfect	She has called him, but he has made it clear that he doesn't want to hear from her again.	She has run the marathon four times.	She has been recognized by bystanders several times.
Past perfect	She had just called when my cell battery died.	She had just run when she heard the news.	By the time she heard the flight was canceled, she had already been standing in line with her ticket for hours.
Future perfect	By the time he gets here, she will have called.	By the time the storm starts, she will have run.	By the time she graduates, she will have been working in the industry for three years.

The **simple present** tense verb form is used to express the general state of things and things that happen constantly. It is formed using the base form of the word, the form that the infinitive—the *to* _____ form—takes. The simple present may need an -s at the end, depending on person and number.

The **simple past** tense verb form is used to express an action that happened at a specific time in the past. Generally, an indication of when the event happened (such as *yesterday* or *When I was in high school*) appears in the sentence. It is formed using the base (to _____) form with an -ed or -d. If the verb is irregular, it will usually be reflected in an irregular past tense form.

The **simple future** tense verb form is used to express an action that will happen at a specific time in the future. It is formed using will + the base (to _____) form.

The **present progressive** tense verb form is used to express actions that are happening now, but that are not expected to continue happening in the future. It is formed with these verb parts: (am/is/are + present participle).

The **past progressive** tense verb form is used when actions were in progress for a finite time in the past. It is formed with these verb parts: (was/were + be + present participle).

The **future progressive** tense verb form is used when actions will be in progress for a finite time in the future. It is formed with these verb parts: (will + be + present participle).

The **present perfect** tense verb form is used to express actions that happened in the past and are still happening, or actions that continue to be true. It is formed with these verb parts: (have/has + present participle).

The **past perfect** tense verb form is used to express actions that happened in the past but that were interrupted by another action or event. It is formed with these verb parts: (had + past participle).

The **future perfect** tense verb form is used to express actions that are expected to happen and be completed in the future but that have not been completed at the present time. It is formed with these verb parts: (will + have + past participle).

Yesterday, Alison kicked the ball around the field. | The verb *kicked* is in the simple past tense because it describes an action that Alison did yesterday, in the past.

I love my dishwasher. | The verb *love* is in the simple present because it describes an action that the writer is currently doing.

By the time I came home, my uncle was leaving. | The verb *came* is in the simple past, but the verb phrase was leaving is in the past progressive because he was doing that action over a period of time in the past.

Mood

Most sentences you will use in your research paper are in the indicative mood. They make a statement or ask a question about something. The **subjunctive mood** is less common. It is still important, however, because it is the form of a verb that expresses wishes or requests, or imagined conditions. It is often used with *if*. Sentences that contain an "if...then" relationship are called **conditionals**. When the conditional is an imagined situation, or wishful thinking, the subjunctive mood is used.

If I *were* boss, we would have three-day weekends every week. | The subjunctive verb *were* is used here because of the conditional; the verb that follows is *would*, which is necessary to indicate that the subject is not actually the boss, and so what follows is not actually true.

If our government officials *were to look* more closely, they *would see* that there are many people who need their help. | The subjunctive form used with conditionals is generally *were* plus the base form of the verb. Here, that's *to see*.

The present-tense subjunctive looks like the present-tense form of the verb.

It is important that we be prepared for anything.

I only ask that the committee make its recommendation before Friday.

The past-tense subjunctive uses the regular past-tense verb form.

He reacted to the show as if he *knew* the characters personally.

The exception is if the verb is *to be*. Then the subjunctive sentence uses *were*.

> She laughed as though she *were* again a young child.

Verbs can be transitive or intransitive

There are some verbs that don't link a subject to a description of the subject. They have different jobs. These verbs are either **transitive** verbs or **intransitive** verbs.

A **transitive** verb describes action that is directed toward something other than the subject of the sentence. In other words, it describes action that happens to something or someone else. That something or someone else is called a direct object.

> Shayna kicked the ball. | *Shayna* is the subject of the sentence. *Kicked* is a transitive verb. It describes what Shayna did to something. The *ball* is the thing that received Shayna's kick. It is the direct object.

An **intransitive** verb describes an action that is **not** directed toward something.

> The children giggled. | *Children* is the noun and *giggled* is the verb. The children didn't giggle an object; they just giggled. That means the verb is intransitive.

Verb Problems

Consider the meaning created in your head when you read the words *jogged*, *destroyed*, *grabbed*, *laughed*, or *serenaded*.

Now consider the meaning created in your head when you read the words *of*, *the*, *due to*, or *well*.

The importance of verbs in your sentences cannot be emphasized enough. Verbs—along with nouns—create meaning in the reader's head.

Verbs also dominate the sentence structure. In other words, the verbs and nouns you choose will require you to make specific choices about punctuation and the way you construct your sentences.

The verb and verb form you choose can make your writing cloudy, or it can help you construct a sentence that is crystal clear and full of meaning.

The verb *jogging* has a much more concrete and memorable meaning than the verb *is*. Choosing concrete and active verbs will increase the liveliness and clarity of your writing.

This section will help you take control over those verbs so that you are the master of your sentence structure, rather than allowing verbs to get the best of you.

Subject–Verb Agreement Errors

Verbs must agree with the subjects they describe in number. A subject-verb agreement error results when they don't.

✔ He *runs* a different path every day. | Because *he* is a singular subject, the correct verb form is *runs*.

✖ He *run* a different path every day. | "He *run* a different path every day" is incorrect because the subject and verb don't agree in number. Even though we may not always hear the verb ending—whether it's *-s* or *-ed*, it's essential to write the ending in order to create a grammatically correct sentence.

Verb conjugation

Regular verbs have an -s when the noun doing the action is singular, and the -s is removed when the noun they are paired with is plural. Not all verbs are regular, though; there are hundreds of **irregular verbs**, which change their spelling instead of following the expected conjugation forms.

	To talk (regular verb)		To be (irregular verb)		To have (irregular verb)	
Present tense	**Singular**	**Plural**	**Singular**	**Plural**	**Singular**	**Plural**
1st person	I talk	We talk	I am	We are	I have	We have
2nd person	You talk	You talk	You are	You are	You have	You have
3rd person	He (she, it) talks	They talk	He (she, it) is	They are	He (she, it) has	They have

Some types of nouns and some sentence constructions can cause difficulty when you are deciding which verb form to use.

Compound subjects

Two or more nouns joined by *and* represent a plural or compound subject, and they need a plural verb.

John and Joe run every morning.	"John and Joe" is the compound subject of this sentence, so the plural verb form, *run*, is used.

Democracy, equality for all, and the American way of life are important to every citizen.	"Democracy, equality for all, and the American way of life" is the compound subject, so the verb, *are*, is in the plural form.

There is an exception. When you have the adjective *each* or *every* modifying the nouns, you would use a *singular* verb. When *each* or *every* precedes the noun in a compound subject, *each* or *every* is considered the singular subject.

Every Boy Scout is eligible for the scholarship.	*Every* is the subject of this sentence, so the verb form is the singular *is*.

Each apple and orange was quickly peeled.	*Each* is the subject. Even though two nouns joined by *and* are part of the subject, *each* makes the subject singular and takes a singular verb form, *was*.

Correlative conjunctions

Correlative conjunctions join two nouns, and they come in pairs. *Either...or* is a pair of correlative conjunctions. So are *neither...nor* and *not only...but also*. Nouns joined by correlative conjunctions can confuse writers when they are trying to choose whether to use a singular or plural verb form, but most of the time, the verb in the sentence has to agree with the noun that is *closer to it*.

Neither the general nor his soldiers were prepared for the attack	Because the sentence uses *neither...nor*, make the verb agree with the subject that is closest to it—soldiers.

Neither the basketball players nor their coach is on time for the ceremony.	In this sentence, the verb agrees with *coach* because it is closest to the verb, *is*.

Not only the captain but also the sailors appreciate gourmet food. | The verb agrees with *sailors*.

The only exception is for the correlative conjunction *both...and*. When two words are joined by *both...and*, the subjects are treated as a plural collection, so the verb should take the *plural* form.

Both the sailors and their captain are looking forward to the banquet. | Sailors and captain are a collective subject, so the verb, *are*, is in the plural form.

Interceding phrases

Nouns introduced by phrases such as *along with* or *as well as* can separate the subject and verb. Information that comes inside these phrases is incidental—it's just extra information for the reader. It is not, however, part of the subject of the sentence and *should not be considered* when making the subject and verb agree.

Anne, along with her sorority sisters, is thinking of trying out for a reality show. | *Anne* is the subject. Regardless of the thoughts of her sorority sisters, she *is* thinking of trying out.

The officer, as well as his union representative, poses a formidable legal threat. | *The officer* is the subject. He *poses* a formidable legal threat. His union representative does as well, but that's just incidental information.

The dancer, together with her stage crew and hairdressers, typically breezes into a hotel and strides to the front desk as if she were the Queen of England. | Even though you might be tempted to consider the dancer's entourage when choosing your verb, resist. *The dancer* is the subject and the correct verb form is the singular *breezes*.

Indefinite pronouns

Indefinite pronouns can refer to a wide variety of antecedents. Some indefinite pronouns always take a singular verb; others always take a plural verb; some others can take a singular verb or a plural verb depending on their use. The table below lists indefinite pronouns and their required verb forms.

Uses singular verb		Uses plural verb	Uses singular or plural verb
• another • anybody • anyone • anything • each • either • every • everybody • everyone	• everything • neither • nobody • no one • nothing • one • somebody • someone	• both • few • many • others • several	• all • any • most • none • some

Everything seems more difficult when you have a toothache. | The word *everything* gathers all things into one singular subject. As a result, the verb form should be singular. Here, *seems* is the singular verb.

Not all politicians are dishonest, of course, but several have been involved in scandals lately. | *Several* is an indefinite pronoun that refers to a subject composed of more than one individual person, place, or thing. *Several* requires a plural verb form. Here, the verb is *have been involved*.

A few indefinite pronouns (all, any, most, none, some) can take either a singular or plural verb, depending whether the antecedent is a count or a non-count noun:

Some of the flour has spilled. | *Some* is the subject. Because its antecedent is *flour*, which is a non-count noun, it takes a singular verb form as non-count nouns do. Ignore "of the" when deciding whether to use a singular or plural verb form. Whether the sentence includes "of the" or leaves it out makes no difference.

Some of the apples are rotten. | *Apples*, a count noun, is the antecedent and takes a plural verb.

Tricky nouns

Collective nouns refer to a group operating as a single unit. They take a singular verb.

The staff decided to work weekends for Habitat for Humanity.	*The staff* is the subject. Because the individual staff members made a decision and are acting together, the appropriate verb is singular.

The jury voted unanimously to convict.	The jury's unanimous vote suggests it is acting together; it merits a singular verb.

If, on the other hand, the unit is not operating as a single entity, the verb is plural.

The jury were divided on the defendant's sentence.	A divided vote suggests factions and requires a plural verb.

The team have different opinions about the new management plan.	Division calls for a plural verb.

More tricky nouns

The word *dollars* can take either a singular verb (when referring to an amount) or a plural verb (when referring to the currency).

Most people think $30 is a lot to pay for a box of fudge.	*$30* is the subject, *is* is the singular verb.

Dollars are actually favored over dinars in many European countries.	The sentence refers to the dollar currency in general rather than to a specific amount. Therefore, the verb is the plural *are*.

Certain nouns end in -s but take a singular verb because they represent one thing.

Measles is a not a pleasant illness to have.	Measles is the subject and requires the singular verb *is*.

Politics attracts many people with law degrees. | Politics is also singular and calls for a singular verb.

Some nouns made of two parts take a plural verb to denote the plurality.

The scissors were expensive. | *Scissors* denotes one item made of a pair of cutting edges; it needs a plural verb.

Sue thinks trousers are most appropriate for work situations. | *Trousers* are made up of two legs, and call for a plural verb.

The table below identifies several tricky nouns and whether they need a singular or plural verb form.

Words ending in -s that take a plural verb	Words ending in -s that take a singular verb	Collective nouns that can take a singular or plural verb
• pants • forceps • tweezers • trousers • shears • scissors • eyeglasses • sunglasses • tongs	• civics • politics • economics • news • measles • mathematics	• family • entourage • committee • team • group • staff • crew • jury

When subjects follow the verb

When subjects follow the verb, choosing the correct verb form can be tricky. Some sentences begin with the words *there are*, *there is*, *it is*, *here is*, or *here are*. These types of phrases are called **expletives** because they vouch for the existence of the items discussed in the rest of the sentence. The verb choice in such sentences depends on the noun the expletive references. If it is singular, the verb will be singular. If the noun is plural, the verb will be plural.

There is a problem with the engine. | The expletive phrase *there is* references a *problem*. Because this subject is singular, use *there is* rather than *there are*.

There are many engines with maintenance guarantees. | The expletive phrase *there are* references *engines*. Because this subject is plural, use *there are* rather than *there is*.

It is the most popular song right now. | The expletive phrase references *song*. It needs a singular verb, so *is* is the correct choice.

Relying too heavily on expletives can create topsy-turvy sentences that confuse the reader. If you can't figure out whether the subject is singular or plural, your reader will probably have a hard time finding the subject of the sentence as well. Try rewriting the sentence without the expletive (for example, "The engine has a problem"); your readers will prefer the increased clarity.

Shifts in Verb Tense

A shift in verb tense occurs when a writer changes from one tense to another without a logical reason. Writers should avoid verb tense shifts because they disrupt the logic of the sentence and are jarring to the reader. They can also create confusion about the writer's meaning.

Read more about verb tense in the characteristics of verbs section.

✘ Langston Hughes, whose writing gained attention and respect in the 1920s, falls out of favor with many political activists by the 1960s. | The sentence starts out in the past, using the past-tense verb *gained*. The verb tense then shifts into the present with *falls*. Because all of the events in the sentence take place in the past, there is no reason to shift tenses.

✔ Langston Hughes, whose writing gained attention and respect in the 1920s, fell out of favor with many political activists by the 1960s. | The sentence uses past tense for both verbs, *gained* and *fell*.

Writers sometimes mistakenly confuse tenses when they are writing about other writers. It is conventional to use the present tense when quoting or describing pieces of art or writing.

✘ In *Half the Sky*, Kristof and WuDunn argued that women's work in China resulted in economic development and improved living conditions | This sentence is incorrect because it uses the past tense, *argued*, to discuss a piece of writing.

✔ In *Half the Sky*, Kristof and WuDunn argue that women's work in China resulted in economic development and improved living conditions. | This sentence is correct even though it shifts tense because there is a reason for the difference in tenses. The writer uses the present tense *argue* because he is talking about a piece of writing; the writer uses the past tense, *resulted*, because the original authors were writing about something that happened in the past. This sentence demonstrates a logical shift in tense.

Prepositions

A preposition is a word or a short group of words (compound preposition) connecting a noun or pronoun to some other part of a sentence.

Single-word prepositions	Compound prepositions
about, after, at, between, during, from, in, like, of, on, through, to, up, with, toward	according to, because of, from within, in spite of, instead of, similar to, different from

Remember that *toward*, *backward*, and *forward* are the preferred spellings in American English. British writers use *towards*, *backwards*, and *forwards*, and some American writers believe these forms to be incorrect.

The preposition and the noun that follows, along with modifiers of the noun, are called the prepositional phrase.

Prepositional phrases
after dinner, between you and me, from time to time, on the tree branch, according to the most reliable sources, in spite of my objections.

My phone's battery is different from your phone's battery. | In this sentence, *different from* is a compound preposition. Remember to choose the correct preposition for a compound preposition pair. *Different from* is correct; *Different than* is not. You can remember the correct preposition by recalling that you also say *Similar to*. *Similar* is the opposite of *different*; *to* is the opposite of *from*.

You can see some common prepositional pairs by looking at this table.

according to	excited about	result in
accustomed to	familiar with	satisfied with
agree with	feel like	search for
angry with	guilty of	similar to
apply to	insist on	scared of
aware of	interested in	speak with
believe in	known for	stare at
belong to	made of	succeed in
care for	opposed to	take advantage of
committed to	participate in	take care of
compare with	preferable to	terrified of
decide on	proud of	think about
depend on	rely on	think of
different from	responsible for	tired of
disagree with	respond to	wait for

Homophones and commonly confused words

Homophones

Our language has more than 6000 words that look alike and sound alike. Some of those are homophones, words that sound alike but are spelled differently. Their meanings are different, too. The following homophones can confuse both the reader and the writer. Here's how to distinguish them.

Call me when you get there. | *There* is an adverb, meaning a location. (Think of "here" inside "there" when location is meant.)

They're going to be upset when they find out. | *They're* is a contraction, meaning "they are." Avoid contractions in formal writing.

Do you think their dog is friendly? | *Their* is a possessive pronoun.

It's always a good idea to back up your writing in multiple places. | *It's* is a contraction, meaning "it is." Avoid contractions in formal writing.

The knife has lost its edge from being used too much. | *Its* is a possessive pronoun.

Don't forget to take your medicine. | *Your* is a possessive pronoun.

You're going to regret that decision. | *You're* is a contraction, meaning "you are."

Please take me to the Empire State Building. | *To* is a preposition.

We'll need two tables to accommodate everyone in our party. | *Two* is a number.

You can come along too. | *Too* is an adverb meaning "also," among other things.

Who's going to clean up this mess? | *Who's* is a contraction, meaning "who is" or "who has."

I can't tell whose voice is on the other end of the phone. | *Whose* is a possessive pronoun.

The train has already left the station. | *Already* is an adverb meaning "by or before an expected time."

We are all ready to leave for the bus. | *All ready* is a combination of two words —a shortened version of the phrase "all are ready."

Commonly confused words

Sometimes words may be pronounced or be spelled slightly different, but people still confuse them often. Knowing the part of speech of such words is helpful, especially when spell check misses an error. For example, *advice* is a noun. *Advise* is a verb. Knowing that you need a thing in a sentence, you could only choose *advice.* When a verb is needed, you have to choose *advise*.

I would be happy to accept your offer. | *Accept* is a verb.

Everyone went to the lake except for Ana. | *Except* a preposition.

No one had more charisma than John F. Kennedy. | *Than* is a conjunction.

First you turn the key, then you put the car in gear. | *Then* is an adverb.

We're going to get lost if we don't find a map soon. | *We're* is a contraction meaning "we are."

Where do you want to go next? | *Where* is an adverb.

The shirt was too loose to wear in public. | *Loose* an adjective.

The team is likely to lose the game if they don't start making goals by the end of the second half. | *Lose* is a verb

I've never been so disappointed in a loss | *Loss* is a noun

Where are we going? | *Are* is a verb form.

Can you find our suitcases? | *Our* is a possessive pronoun.

Do you think an increase in wages will affect employee retention rates? | *Affect* can be a verb or a noun. Here, it's a verb.

His affect seems to have changed since he got the promotion. | The noun is used primarily as a psychological term meaning an emotion or mood.

What will the effect of the slow economy on jobs? | *Effect* is used here as a noun.

Can increasing taxes really effect the change we are looking for? | *Effect* is used here as a verb; you'll only see it used this way rarely.

There are fewer women than men in the class. | *Few* is used when you can quantify the noun.

I am less optimistic today than I was yesterday. | *Less* is used with nouns or adjectives that cannot be counted or quantified.

Mr. Dreyfuss is a good music teacher. | *Good* is an adjective.

He plays the clarinet quite well. | *Well* is an adverb.

He is a bad tennis player. | *Bad* is an adjective.

He plays tennis badly. | *Badly* is an adverb. Here it modifies *plays*.

His sister, by contrast, plays tennis quite well. | Remember to use *well* rather than *good* when you are describing a verb.

But he says she's only a good player, not a great one. | And use *good* when you are modifying a noun. Here, *good* modifies *player*.

Confusing Effect/Affect

Since both spellings of "effect" and "affect" can be either a noun or a verb, it can be hard to know which spelling is appropriate. The best way is simply to memorize and internalize their definitions and understand what the context calls for.

Study the chart below, which contains each usage of the word and its meaning. After studying the chart below, if you still find that the differences aren't clear, a good way to internalize the information is to create flashcards.

Word	Definition	Example
Affect ***(noun)***	Emotion; a set of observable manifestations of a subjectively experienced emotion	The passionate violinist played her solo with lively **affect**.
Affect ***(verb)***	To produce a material influence upon or alteration in; to act upon (as a person or a person's mind or feelings) so as to produce a response	The weather report will **affect** whether I go skiing this weekend.
Effect ***(noun)***	A change that is a result or consequence of an action or other cause	Mixing Diet Coke and Mentos is said to produce an explosive **effect**.
Effect ***(verb)***	To cause to come into being; to bring about	The company has **effected** a new social media policy.

Confusing There/Their/They're

"There," "their" and "they're" are what's known as homophones, or words that sound alike but are spelled differently and have different meanings. In writing it is extremely important not to confuse "there," "their" and "they're."

There refers to a location.

Their is a possessive pronoun

They're is a contraction of "they" and "are."

Confusing It's/Its

Its is a possessive pronoun, which means it is used to show that something or someone belongs to something or someone else. For example:

> The university canceled its winter gala because of the blizzard.

In this sentence, **its** is used to show that it was the winter gala of the university that was canceled. In other words, the possessive pronoun indicates that the winter gala "belongs" to the university.

It's is a contraction that means "it is." For example:

> It's raining outside.

Here, the contraction **it's** can be replaced by "it is," and the sentence will still make sense:

> It's raining outside = It is raining outside

If you tried replace the **its** in the previous example with "it is," the sentence would not make sense:

> ✘ The university canceled **it is** winter gala because of the blizzard.
>
> ✔ The university canceled its winter gala because of the blizzard.

Correct Capitalization

There are many rules about capitalization. Most of these rules come naturally to us and simply become a habit, such as always capitalizing the first word of a sentence as well as the pronoun "I." But other rules may not come so easily. Here's a chart that breaks down the not-so-well-known rules about capitalization:

People's Titles	Titles of Books, Movies, Articles, Songs, etc.	Directions
• Always capitalize titles when the title precedes the name • Do not capitalize if the title comes after the name in a sentence • Capitalize the title if it comes after the name in a letter or email signature	• Capitalize the major words in the title • Do not capitalize prepositions or articles unless they are the first word in the title	• Do not capitalize when using as compass directions • Alway capitalize when the direction is used to refer to a specific part of the country
Professor Eaton teaches science. Kelly Eaton is a professor at Science College. Kelly Eaton, *President* Department of Science Science College Madison, WI 53532	*Old Ladies Who Didn't Love Me* is a narrative essay by Taffy Brodesser-Akner. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a book by Harper Lee.	The campus is located two miles north of the downtown area. We're going on a roadtrip through the South.

Names of Groups	Direct Quotations	Dates, Holidays, and Seasons	Family Relationships
• Always capitalize official group names or titles	• Always capitalize the first word of a direct quotation • Do not capitalize if you are incorporating part of the quote into your sentence	• Always capitalize days of the week and months of the year • Always capitalize holidays • Do not capitalize seasons unless the season is part of a title	• Do not capitalize unless used as a proper name or as part of a title
National Science Teachers Association Boston Celtics American Kennel Club	"Quiet," Emily whispered, "The baby's sleeping." Mr. Smith's promise to "renew contracts after the first of the year" turned out to be a lie.	Monday, February 3rd will be the last day to register for the writing workshop. I'll be home for Christmas. We will be putting together a writing workshop this winter. Students can register for our Winter Writing Workshop.	Thanks for the cake, Dad. Aunt Betty is my favorite aunt. Emily is my sister.

Punctuation in Sentences

Punctuation that you use within sentences can make quite an impact. Each type of punctuation indicates a specific relationship between the words and phrases that surround it.

If you learn to use these punctuation marks and understand the difference between them, you'll have gained mastery over several tools for quickly adding variety to your sentence structure.

Semicolons have two important uses. The first is to link two independent clauses. That means that a semicolon joins two phrases that can each stand on their own as a sentence.

Two separate sentences	One sentence made up of two independent clauses
Carlos bought a new phone. He has wanted one for a while.	Carlos bought a new phone; he has wanted one for a while.
You'd better bring an umbrella. It looks like rain.	You'd better bring an umbrella; it looks like rain.
The meeting will start in half an hour. We're running late.	The meeting will start in half an hour; we're running late.

The second use of semicolons is separating complicated items in a series. Usually, you would use commas to separate items in a series. If the items themselves are made up of several words or contain punctuation, though, use semicolons instead.

> Harry's daily schedule included meditation, which he performed for an hour; breakfast (generally an elaborate affair); a jog to work; and, lastly, a long session recording the day's events in his journal.

Colons introduce information, such as a list, an example, or an explanation.

> ✔ Here's what you will need to survive at this job: persistence, patience, and a sense of humor. | Use a colon only at the end of an independent clause.
>
> ✘ To survive at this job, you will need: persistence, patience, and a sense of humor. | Do not use a colon to introduce a list unless the introductory phrase is a complete sentence.
>
> ✔ To survive at this job, you will need persistence, patience, and a sense of humor. | You can also just remove the colon.

There are several types of punctuation that organize information in a sentence.

Parentheses go around information that is not of primary importance in a sentence. The information in a set of parentheses is an extra, an aside, or a comment about the rest of the passage. Information enclosed in parentheses can be part of another sentence, or it can be its own sentence.

> I told Mrs. Andrews that I would be happy to help. (What choice did I have?)

> The team had won the pennant for the last five years (and would have won for the last six, had it not been for the infamous sleeping umpire incident).

Dashes are another type of punctuation that insert a comment. While parentheses give a comment less importance than the surrounding material, dashes give it emphasis. Dashes can surround a bit of information the way parentheses do, or a single dash can mark the beginning of a comment at the end of a sentence.

> The sun sank in the sky—such a glorious profusion of color—and the crowd settled in for the wait until the fireworks display began.

Dashes are also used to show a break in the flow of speech.

> "You've got ten minutes for the quiz," the teacher said. "No—make that five minutes."

> Nola glanced at the clock and noted that there were sixteen more minutes until her lunch break—not that she was counting, of course.

Ellipses are sets of three dots. They can show a pause in speech.

> "Hmmm," she said slowly. "I guess my favorite ice cream flavor is . . . well, I like them all.

Ellipses also show that part of a text has been omitted. Consider the following text:

> The komodo dragon is not the fire-breathing creature of folklore, but an actual, enormous lizard found on the islands of Indonesia.

A writer could use ellipses to condense the text this way:

> ✔ The komodo dragon is . . . an actual, enormous lizard found on the islands of Indonesia. | Notice that, even though part of the sentence is removed, the sentence structure is maintained.
>
> ✘ The komodo dragon is . . . actual, enormous lizard found on the islands of Indonesia. | This sentence is grammatically incorrect because the word *an* or some other article is necessary with a singular noun such as *lizard.*

Hyphens have several uses.

They divide multi-syllable words at line breaks.

> The children gathered around the caterpillar in the jar, look-
> ing forward to the day it would become a butterfly.

They also join some compound words, which are words made up of more than one word.

> mother-in-law, commander-in-chief, forty-five

Use hyphens in compound adjectives (adjectives made up of more than one word) when the adjective comes before the noun.

> Langston Hughes, an African-American poet, was a defining figure of the Harlem Renaissance.

> Fuzzy is a much-loved pet rabbit who lives in a hutch in the yard.

Certain words with prefixes and suffixes use hyphens.

> His enemies accused him of being un-American.

> The company's ex-president avoided media appearances.

> The doll-like child smiled sweetly.

Apostrophes show possession or ownership. To show that one person or thing owns something, add an apostrophe and the letter s at the end of the owner's name.

> The state's peaches are its most important export.

> Juan's aunt is coming to visit next week.

When the owner is a plural noun, put the apostrophe after the *s*.

> The teachers' cars are in the faculty parking lot.

> The sisters' room is always a mess.

Apostrophes also show contractions, or words that have been formed by omitting letters.

Words	Contraction
he is	he's
do not	don't
would not	wouldn't
you will	you'll
we have	we've
who is	who's

Watch out for a common apostrophe mistake: its/it's

The possessive form of *it* does *not* contain an apostrophe.

> The bicycle fell over on its side.

When *it's* has an apostrophe, it always means *it is*.

> It's time for breakfast.

Apostrophe Use

Apostrophes are used to show **possession** or **contractions**. For the most part, the rules for these are straightforward, but there are some tricky words that can cause some confusion.

Singular Possession

To show that one person or thing owns something, add an apostrophe and the letter *-s* at the end of the owner's name.

> The **school's** principal
>
> **Bill's** guitar
>
> The **thunder's** boom
>
> The **wolf's** howl

If the singular noun ends in *-s* or *-z*, you should still add an apostrophe and another *-s* at the end.

> The **boss's** salary
>
> **Lewis's** computer
>
> The **waltz's** steps

However, be careful of possessive pronouns that end in *-s*. These do NOT use the apostrophe:

> The money is **yours**.
>
> The dress is **hers**.
>
> The toy is **his**.
>
> The table is missing **its** leg.
>
> The house is **ours**.
>
> The yard is **theirs**.

Note: If you see "it's" with an apostrophe, then it is a contraction for "it is," not the possessive form.

Plural Possession

When the owner is a plural noun, put the apostrophe after the *-s*.

The **schools'** superintendent

The **Andersons'** family tree

The **potatoes'** skins

The **wolves'** claws

However, there are some plural nouns that do not end in *-s*. These nouns will use an apostrophe and an *-s* in order to indicate possession. Because of this, they will look like singular possessive nouns, but they are still plural nouns. Here are some examples:

The **men's** coats

The **women's** umbrellas

The **children's** playground

The **people's** outrage

The **mice's** food

The **geese's** wings

The **cacti's** needles

Contractions

Contractions are used when combining multiple words together and omitting some letters. For instance:

do not = **don't**

will not = **won't**

I will = **I'll**

they are = **they're**

should have = **should've** (Note: This is NEVER written as "should of"!)

Sometimes contractions will end in an apostrophe and an *-s*, and this will indicate a word being contracted with "is." For instance:

> **It's** raining = It is raining
>
> **Who's** next? = Who is next?
>
> **Laura's** here = Laura is here

There is also the unique word "let's," which is a contraction of "let us."

> Let us go together = **Let's** go together

Use context to determine whether a word ending in an apostrophe and *-s* is a possessive noun or a contraction.

Parallel Sentence Structure

What is parallel structure? The term "parallel" just means that the sentence structure is grammatically consistent throughout. Sentences that have parallel structure contain elements that are similar. For example:

> **The car is big, red, and muddy.**
>
> The car is (adjective), (adjective), and (adjective).

In this sentence, the items in the series are all adjectives. These adjectives describe the subject of the sentence, which is the car.

> **The car is big, red, and has a flat tire.**
>
> The car is (adjective), (adjective), and (phrase).

Elements should be similar when connected in a series or list or when they are joined by coordinating conjunctions. What do we mean by "elements"? Here's a breakdown of different sentence "elements" that you'll want to watch out for when constructing parallel sentences:

Words	Infinitives	Gerunds	Phrases	Clauses
Words are the building blocks of all sentences. Together words form phrases, clauses, and full sentences. As you learned earlier in the course, words are classified by parts of speech.	Infinitives are often considered the simplest verb form. Most of the time they follow this simple structure: "to" + verb.	Gerunds are verb forms that don't function as verbs in a sentence. They always end in "ing" and are often used as nouns or modifiers. In other words, gerunds are words that look like verbs but don't act like verbs.	A phrase is a group of related words that is missing either a subject or a verb or both. Phrases may contain nouns and verbs, but they do not have a subject performing an action.	A clause is a group of related words that contains a subject and a verb. Clauses can be independent or dependent. Dependent clauses are also known as subordinate clauses.
In this sentence, words come together to form a complete idea: After a dip in the lake, we went for a hike up the tallest mountain in the park.	To swim, to hike, to kayak, to eat, to sleep, to laugh, to drive, to dance, to catch, to write.	Swimming in the lake, I saw a fish jump out of the water. Or: Writing is one of my favorite pastimes.	The most delicious cupcake Or: Over the tall, icy mountain	Independent clause: Joe ran to the bus stop. Dependent clause: Before Joe ran to the bus stop

When you construct parallel sentences, you need to make sure all of your "elements" are parallel and grammatically consistent. For example:

> We went to the little coffee shop across from the deli, above the bookshop, and around the corner from the library.

All of the "elements" in this list are all prepositional phrases, so this sentence is grammatically parallel.

Here's another example of parallel sentence structure:

> **We love to sing, dance, and write.**

You could also write:

> **We love to sing, to dance, and to write.**

Or:

> **We love singing, dancing, and writing.**

But you couldn't write:

> **We love singing, dancing, and to write.**

The above sentence is not parallel. The elements in the sentence do not match grammatically. "Singing" and "dancing" are both gerunds and "to write" is an infinitive.

Misplaced Modifiers

A modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that modifies or describes another word or phrase. For example:

> Emily laid her purple towel down on the sandy beach.

In this sentence, "*purple*" and "*sandy*" are modifiers. They describe what comes after them ("*towel*" and "*beach*"). Modifiers don't always have to come before what they are describing. They can also come after:

> The cookies at the craft fair were delicious.

In this sentence, the phrase "*at the craft fair*" modifies "*cookies*" even though this information comes after rather than before.

> The oatmeal raisin cookies at the craft fair were delicious.

In this sentence, "*oatmeal raisin*" and "*at the craft fair*" are both modifiers of "*cookies*."

As you may have guessed, a *misplaced* modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that has been *misplaced* or separated from the word that it modifies or describes. For example:

> Jim ate the lunch that he packed slowly.

This makes the reader wonder, "Did Jim *eat* slowly or did he *pack his lunch* slowly?" The modifier "slowly" has been misplaced, causing the reader to become confused. To clarify, the writer needs to put the modifier in the correct place:

> Jim slowly ate the lunch that he packed.
>
> OR
>
> Jim ate the lunch that he slowly packed.