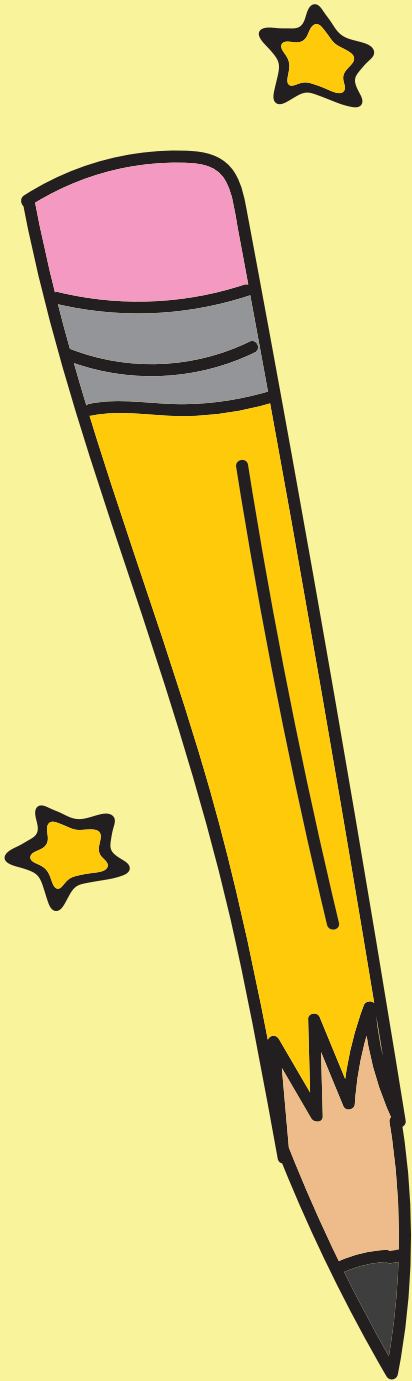


A BRIEF GUIDE TO COMMON WRITING ERRORS



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1. WHAT ARE THESE SYMBOLS & WHEN DO I USE THEM?



Periods are used at the end of declarative sentences. These types of sentences make commands or statements.

Example: You should eat all of your vegetables because they are very nutritious.



Exclamation points (or marks) are used at the end of exclamatory sentences. These types of sentences usually express an intense emotion, like anger or joy.

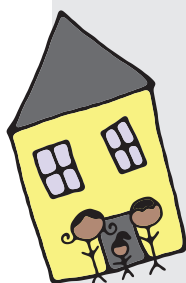
Example: You better eat all of your vegetables!



Question marks are used to indicate that a sentence is a question. **NOTE:** Indirect questions **do not** use question marks. They are usually embedded within declarative sentences and thus end with a period.

Example: Did you eat all of your vegetables?

Indirect: I wonder if they ate all of their vegetables.

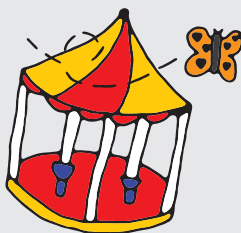


Dashes can be short (en dash) or long (em dash), and either shows a range in numbers or acts similarly to a comma. When it acts like a comma, it separates phrases (groups of words rather than individual words like a hyphen does) and indicates a pause.

En dash: I have lived in my home from 1999-2019.

Em dash: My home reminds me of one thing—time with my family.

Hyphens connect compound words and create compound modifiers. Compound words are two or more words that, when put together, create a new word with a new meaning. Similarly, compound modifiers include two or more words to function like an adjective.



Compound word without hyphen: Butter+fly = Butterfly

Compound word with hyphens: Merry-go-round

Compound word with hyphen to act as adjective: Good-hearted

Sentence: The good-hearted butterfly circled the merry-go-round filled with kids.



Slashes mean either “and”, “or”, or both “and” and “or.”

Examples: Or: Each athlete must pick up his/her uniform.

And: They are all students/athletes.

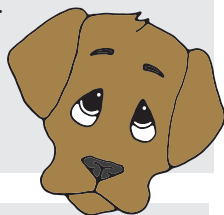
And/Or: The students want cake/ice cream at the athletics meeting.



Semicolons connect two independent clauses (a clause that can stand alone as a sentence) in one sentence. However, these clauses must be closely related in thought. Also, semicolons can be used before conjunctive adverbs or transitional phrases between two independent clauses.

Examples: I love dogs; they are good companions.

I love dogs; however, they require a lot of care.



Colons are placed after an independent clause to introduce a list, phrase, or quotation.

Examples: My first aid kit has the essentials: bandaids, gauze, medicine, tape and scissors.

I know what will heal your cut: bandages and ointment.

You know what they say: “Happiness is the best medicine.”





Apostrophes are used to form contractions or possessives.

To form possessives, you usually add an apostrophe **before** the “s.” If the word already ends in an “s,” then you add the apostrophe **after** the “s.”

However, be careful of words that are already plural and do not need an apostrophe + “s,” like children, teeth, octopi, etc.

Also, you do not apostrophes if the words are simply plural, like “several apricots” or “ten kittens.”

Examples: Contractions:

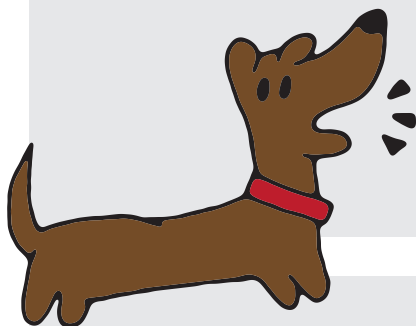
Could + not = couldn't

I + have = I've

Possessives:

The dog's bark is loud.

James' dog is loud.



IT'S

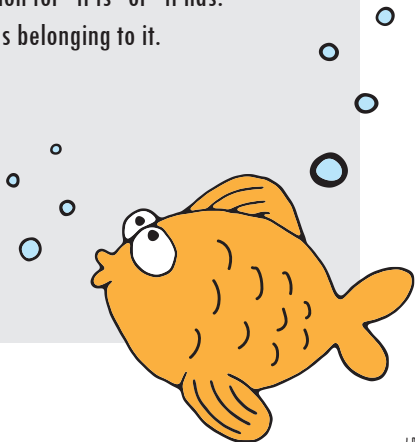
Contractions are not punctuation marks. A contraction is a word made by shortening or combining two others, such as “I have” or “do not,” and uses apostrophes to do so. As contractions, these examples would look like “I've” and “don't.” A common mistake with contractions comes down to the word “it's.” An apostrophe is used with “it's” only when the word is acting as a contraction for “it is” or “it has.”

Without an apostrophe, it means belonging to it.

Examples: I don't like seafood.

It's been a while since I have eaten fish for dinner.

The fish enjoys swimming around its big bowl.





Commas are used to create a break within a sentence by separating words, clauses, or ideas. Placing commas within sentences can often be determined by speaking the sentence aloud and then noting any pauses. However, there are several common errors when it comes to using commas correctly. When used incorrectly, commas can break connections between ideas within a sentence or cause unnecessary pauses.

Examples:

1. A comma shouldn't separate a subject from its verb:

Incorrect: My friend Ruth, is a beautiful singer.

Correct: My friend Ruth is a beautiful singer.



2. Don't add a comma before the word "that" if it's introducing a restrictive clause:

Incorrect: My microphone, that broke can't be used tonight.

Correct: My microphone that broke can't be used tonight.



3. A comma is used after introductory phrases.

Incorrect: After the performance they went out to eat.

Correct: After the performance, they went out to eat.



4. Use a comma between two independent clauses connected by a coordinating conjunction.

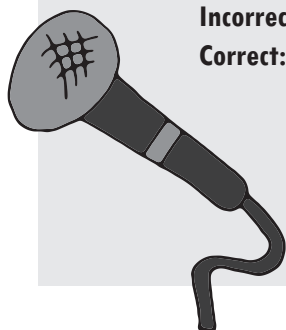
Incorrect: I sang at the concert but I did not have a solo.

Correct: I sang at the concert, but I did not have a solo.

5. But don't use a comma before a subordinate conjunction. In sentences that use subordinate conjunctions, the conjunction links the two clauses to express the correct meaning so no comma is needed.

Incorrect: My throat is sore, because I sang a lot last night.

Correct: My throat is sore because I sang a lot last night.

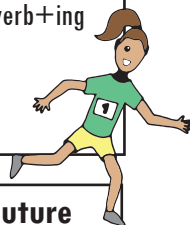


2. DON'T GET TENSE OVER TENSES!

There are many verb tenses in English grammar and they can be complicated, but the most important thing to remember is to keep them consistent in your writing. Below are two charts that provide brief explanations and examples of the four main verb tenses. Specifically, if you are writing in the present tense, stay in present tense throughout the piece of writing, and if you are writing in past tense, continue writing in past tense!



	Present	Past	Future
Simple (for short actions)	verb/verb+s (+s for pronouns other than I) or am/is/are (use the present forms of to be when you do not have another verb)	verb+ed or past tense form of word	will + verb
Continuous (for long actions)	am/is/are + verb+ing	was/were + verb+ing	will be + verb+ing
Perfect (often used with words like already, just, ever, never, yet, for, since, many times, by)	have/has + past tense form of verb	had + past tense form of verb	will have + past tense form of verb
Perfect Continuous (Considers duration, especially long durations and often includes the word for or by)	have/has been + verb+ing	had been + verb+ing	will have been + verb+ing



	Present	Past	Future
Simple	I want to run. She wants to run. I run . It is an oval track.	This morning, I wanted to run. This morning, I ran .	Later, I will run .
Continuous	Currently, I am running .	I was running .	Later, I will be running .
Perfect	I have just run 10 miles.	When she arrived back home, I had already run .	I will have run 10 miles by the time she arrives home.
Perfect Continuous	I have been running everyday.	I had been running for two years before I won a race.	I will have been running for more than an hour by the time I finish the race.

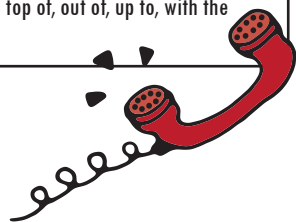
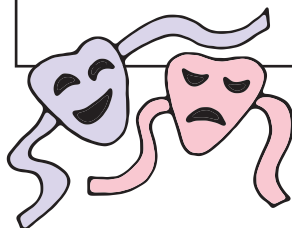


3. WORDS, WORDS, WORDS!

Articles and Prepositions

The three articles are the, a, and an. Articles may be indefinite or definite, and identify nouns that are countable or noncountable, or specified or unspecified. Sometimes no article is required as well. Regarding prepositions, their function is to connect either nouns or pronouns to another part of a sentence, whether with a single word or in a prepositional phrase.

A/An (Indefinite)	The (Definite)	Prepositions and Prepositional Phrases
1. Used for objects that are not specific or are one of several things of a similar type. Ex. I need a phone.	1. Used for specific objects or objects that both speaker and listener know. Ex. Can you hand me the telephone?	1. Act as connecting words that link related words, describe certain circumstances, locate specific spaces and times, explain directions, or show how something happens.
2. Used when you first introduce an object. Ex. I saw a movie last night.	2. Used when we mention an object again. Ex. The movie is based on true events.	Ex. at, by, for, from, in, of, on, to, with, about, above, after, against, along, among, before, below, between, but, despite, during, inside, into, like, near, onto, over, past, since, through, under, until, up, upon, versus, within, without
3. Used as a synonym for the number one. Ex. I made a phone call yesterday.	3. Used before plural countries/regions/bodies of water. Ex. The Pacific Ocean is used as a setting in the movie.	2. More than one word that create relationships in time and space by placing objects, ideas, and facts in a descriptive context
4. Used to indicate one of a group Ex. He is an actor.	4. Used before certain adjectives to create plural meaning. Ex. The rich produce many movies.	Ex. according to, along with, apart from, because of, by way of, due to, except for, in addition to, in case of, in front of, in regard to, in place of, in spite of, instead of, next to, on account of, on top of, out of, up to, with the exception of



Commonly Confused Words

There are a variety of words that are commonly confused because of their similar spellings or spoken sounds. If you are using a new word for the first time or are unsure of a word's spelling, check a dictionary to verify the meaning and spelling. Some examples of commonly confused words include, then vs. than, breath vs. breathe, excepted vs. accepted, or there vs. their vs. they're.

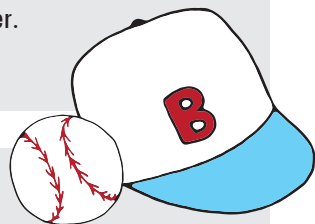
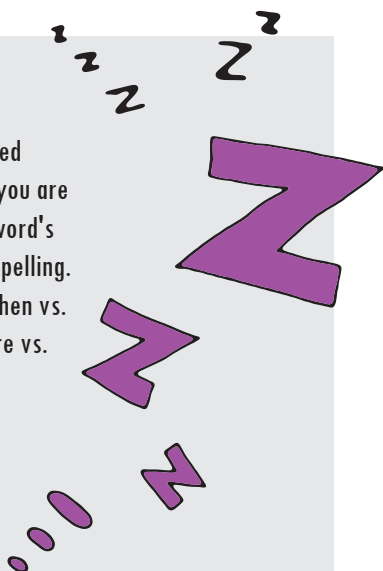
Examples:

Incorrect: I slept longer **then** I did yesterday.

Correct: I slept longer **than** I did yesterday.

Incorrect: The child went over to **there** house for a sleepover.

Correct: The child went over to **their** house for a sleepover.



Capitalization

Missing capitalizations or capitalizing words that do not need to be capitalized can be misleading to readers. Proper nouns should be capitalized because they refer to specific groups of people, places, or things. Common nouns, on the other hand, refer to general groups of people, places, or things.

Tip: One way to identify the difference is to place **the** (or another article like **a** or **an**) before the word. If you can place **the** before the noun and it portrays the correct meaning, then it is likely a common noun. **Ex. the game, a dog, an ice cream cone**

Examples:

Incorrect: joe went to boston to watch the red sox play. While at the Game, he caught a Baseball.

Correct: Joe went to Boston to watch the Red Sox play. While at the game, he caught a baseball.

*Joe is the individual's name, Boston is a city, and the Red Sox are an official sports team, so all of these nouns need to be capitalized. The nouns **game** and **baseball** are common nouns and do not need to be capitalized.

4. SENTENCE-LEVEL STUFF

Run-ons and Comma Splices

A **run-on sentence** combines two complete thoughts or independent clauses without correct punctuation or sentence structure.

Tip: Remember you must have some kind of boundary between your independent clauses. These boundaries can include a period, semicolon (with or without a conjunctive adverb, like **however**, **therefore**, **then**, etc.), or a comma **with** a coordinating conjunction (for, and, not, but, or, yet, so).

A **comma splice** occurs when a comma is used to separate two independent clauses rather than a period, semicolon, or a coordinating conjunction.

Tip: A comma splice acts similarly to a run-on sentence. The difference is that it includes a comma incorrectly. It can be corrected in the same ways as a run-on by adding a period, a semicolon, or just placing a coordinating conjunction after the comma.

Examples:

Incorrect:

Run On: Fred went to the store he bought some candy.

Or

Comma Splice: Fred went to the store, he bought some candy.

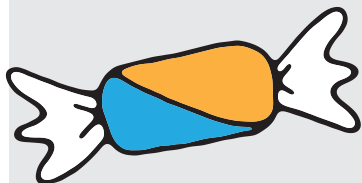
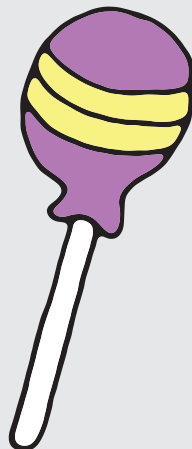
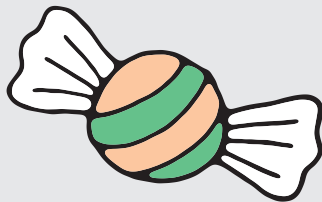
Correct:

Fred went to the store. He bought some candy.

Fred went to the store; he bought some candy.

Fred went to the store; **then**, he bought some candy.

Fred went to the store, **and** he bought some candy.



Subject-Verb Agreement

This grammatical component has to do with the balance of a sentence. The subject and the verb of a sentence must agree with one another in number whether they are singular or plural. If the subject of the sentence is singular, its verb must be as well; and if the subject is plural, the verb must also be plural. Tip: If there's a singular subject, the verb usually ends in s. If there's a plural subject, then the verb does not usually end in s.

Examples:

Incorrect: My mom respect me.

Correct: My mom respects me.

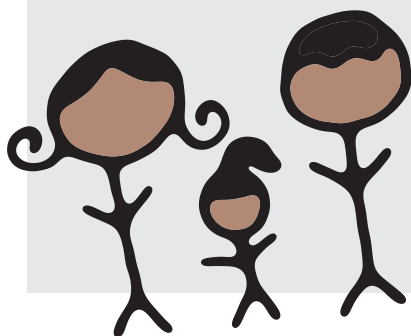
* **Mom** is singular, so the verb **respect** must match by adding an s.



Incorrect: My mom and dad respects me.

Correct: My mom and my dad respect me.

* **Mom and dad** is plural, so the verb **respect** does not end in an s.



5. OTHER RESOURCES

For more elaborate explanations on any of these topics, check out these resources below!



Book a tutoring session at **UVM's Writing Center** to explore any writing concerns you have with a peer!

<https://www.uvm.edu/undergradwriting/writing-tutoring-services/appointments>



"Writing Matters: A Handbook for Writing and Research: Second Edition" by Rebecca M. Howard

This book covers a vast array of grammatical components and writing elements. We have several copies here in the writing center, so feel free to ask if you can take a look during a session!



The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has created an elaborate online resource covering writing processes, styles, genres, and grammatical components.

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/>



The Writing Center at the University Wisconsin - Madison has developed an online handbook for grammar and punctuation.

<https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/grammarpunct/>



The Howe Center for Writing Excellence at Miami University has formed another online resource to be available at your fingertips that explains writing processes, styles, genres, and grammatical components as well.

<http://miamioh.edu/hcwe/handouts/index.html>

