



# Common Writing Problems

## 1. Pronoun Reference Errors

Careful use of pronouns will make your writing efficient and clear; careless use will make your statements awkward or incomprehensible. Follow these rules:

1. Link your pronouns to specific **antecedents**;
2. Ensure that each pronoun has only one possible antecedent.

Sentences containing ambiguous, vague, or remote references should be carefully rewritten. Some, like the pronoun *this*, are especially dangerous. *This* makes a good adjective . . .

***This* project has been widely supported within the community.**

. . . but a potentially ambiguous pronoun:

**Interest has been expressed by the city recreation department and various sports and recreation clubs in the area. A number of conditions must be met in order for *this* to happen.**

**Precept:** *Every pronoun should refer directly to a real (and near) antecedent; relative pronouns are especially tricky.*

<b>Example:</b> We will develop partnerships within our community and be flexible and open-minded to <i>their</i> needs.	Correction: We will develop partnerships within our community and be flexible and open-minded to <i>our partners'</i> needs.
<b>Example:</b> Adolescence is a time when <i>they</i> want the freedom of being an adult but not the responsibility.	Correction: <i>Adolescents</i> want the freedom of being adults but not the responsibility.
<b>Example:</b> The bank's safe was located in the rear of the mall. <i>It</i> was open all night.	Correction: The bank in the rear of the mall was open all night.
<b>Example:</b> I worked for an agency headed by a local official <i>that</i> provided the UN with data on human rights violations.	Correction: I worked for a locally-governed <i>agency that</i> provided the UN with data on human rights violations.

## 2. Agreement Errors

The principle of **grammatical agreement** requires that subjects and verbs and pronouns and the words they replace have compatible forms. Agreement is a simple matter in English, involving just two rules:

1. subjects and verbs must agree in **number**;
2. pronouns and their antecedents must agree in **person, number, and gender**.

Tricky pronouns, including (usually singular) indefinite pronouns sometimes create problems.

**Precept:** *Subjects and verbs agree in **number**; pronouns agree with their antecedents in **person, number, and gender**.*

<p><b>Example:</b> Many workplaces have a dress code policy that exclude wearing items such as tank tops, halter tops, and muscle shirts.</p>	<p>Correction: Many workplaces have a dress code <i>policy</i> that <i>excludes</i> wearing items such as tank tops, halter tops, and muscle shirts.</p>
<p><b>Example:</b> Each applicant brought their résumé to the interview.</p>	<p>Corrections: Each applicant brought <i>his or her</i> résumé to the interview. The <i>applicants</i> brought <i>their</i> résumés to the interview.</p>

### 3. Mixed Constructions

A mixed construction is a failure to resolve conflicting forms of a statement. Such sentences are not necessarily the result of confused thought, although clear thinking can eliminate them. Writers often think of a better way of phrasing something as they write, and so finish a sentence in a superior style . . . at the expense of coherence. To avoid creating mixed constructions, think sentences through to their ends before writing or during proofreading.

**Precept:** *The halves of complex sentences must combine to form a consistent statement.*

<p><b>Coordination/ subordination:</b> <i>Although</i> he submitted his application in June, <i>but</i> by September he still had not received a reply.</p>	<p>Correction: Although he submitted his application in June, by September he still had not received a reply.</p>
<p><b>Mixed idiom:</b> As a general rule of thumb, inappropriate dress is anything that is distracting and calls attention away from business.</p>	<p>Correction: As a general rule, inappropriate dress is anything that is distracting and calls attention away from business.</p>
<p><b>Faulty definition:</b> A mass extinction is when a major percentage of the earth's species die out at the same time.</p>	<p>Correction: A mass extinction occurs when a major percentage of the earth's species die out at the same time.</p>
<p><b>Correlative:</b> Integral back-up systems can be valuable both for large-scale businesses as well as smaller offices.</p>	<p>Correction: Integral back-up systems can be valuable for both large-scale businesses and smaller offices.</p>

### 4. Faulty Predication

Faulty predication is the failure to match subject and predicate logically; this is sometimes called an **alignment error**. Faulty predication is a purely semantic problem: sentences with such errors may be perfectly correct grammatically, but something is wrong with their meaning.

**Precept:** *Subject, predicate, and object or complement must combine to make a meaningful statement.*

<b>Example:</b> An example of sexism is a man who hires women on the basis of their appearance.	Correction: An example of sexism is the practice of hiring women on the basis of their appearance.
<b>Example:</b> Many new industries occurred as a result of advances in e-commerce.	Correction: Many new industries developed as a result of advances in e-commerce.
<b>Example:</b> The quickness and immediacy of our response will be swift, full, and reflexive.	Correction: Our response will be swift, full, and reflexive.

## 5. Comma Splices

Comma splices are sometimes allowed, but to use them confidently you must know exactly what you are doing. The basic error consists of softening the break between two main clauses by linking them with a comma. This is sometimes done deliberately when the clauses are short and closely related, or when they produce a contrast. Do this if you dare, but do realize that pedantic readers may well consider it an error.

**Precept:** *Use appropriate conjunctions to join main clauses.*

<b>Example:</b> There are good regulations, there are bad regulations.	More prudent: There are good regulations; there are bad regulations.
<b>Example:</b> It is not the size of the project that alarms me, it is the size of the project team.	More prudent: It is not the size of the project that alarms me: it is the size of the project team.
<b>Example:</b> Multicasting is so important in these situations, it provides a way to send a single data stream from one sending source to various destinations.	More prudent: Multicasting is so important in these situations because it provides a way to send a single data stream from one sending source to various destinations.

Every combination of a subject and a finite verb (i.e. one completely expressing an action in time) is a **clause**, effectively a sentence. Either subordinate or punctuate accordingly!

## 6. Apostrophe Errors

Apostrophes mark omitted characters in contractions and indicate the possessive form of nouns. See QuickNotes on punctuation for more about this and other punctuation marks. Here are some basic notes:

### a.) Contractions

The apostrophe marks the position of missing letters; *would not* can be contracted to *wouldn't*, *he is* or *he has* can be contracted to *he's*, *we are* can be contracted to *we're*, and *it is* can be

contracted to *it's*. Never confuse the possessive pronoun *its* with the contraction *it's*! Contractions are perfectly appropriate in informal writing, but some stylesheets discourage writers from using them in formal papers.

### b.) Possessive apostrophes

When used to mark the possessive case of a noun, an apostrophe follows or is followed by an "s". The possessive case is most frequently used to indicate ownership or authorship.

<b>Steven's project</b>	is a project assigned to Steven
<b>Microsoft's product</b>	is a product owned by Microsoft
<b>the server's function</b>	is the function of the server
<b>the bus's capacity</b>	is the capacity of <i>one</i> bus

Note that singular nouns ending in "s" receive both an apostrophe and an "s." Some stylesheets recommend adding only an apostrophe if the singular noun ends in "s" and the additional "s" sound would not be pronounced, but this seems to be a needless complication.

### PROPER NOUNS ENDING IN "S":

The possessive form of a singular *proper* noun (that is, a capitalized name) ending with an "s" usually includes an apostrophe and an additional "s":

<b>James's wallet</b>	eez sound.
<b>Jesus' followers</b>	<b>Euripides' works</b>

Some writers use only an apostrophe (without the extra "s") after all polysyllabic names ending with an "s" or "z" sound. Most style sheets discourage this.

## 7. Semicolon/ Colon Errors

The semicolon has only three functions, two joining and one dividing.

### a.) The semicolon joins closely related ideas expressed in independent clauses.

**The person with this disease faces enormous challenges; his or her family faces almost equal challenges.**

Note: A **clause** is a word group that includes a subject and a related verb; **independent clauses** are those that can stand alone as sentences. As a conjunction, the semicolon is comparable to *and*: It joins pairs of balanced statements without saying anything about the relationship between them. Use it sparingly; semicolon links quickly become annoying.

### b.) The semicolon supplements a conjunctive adverb joining main clauses:

**QuickZip Inc. has reduced its domain controllers to those located in**

**headquarters and the two head offices; therefore, it should have only three child domains.**

Among the most common conjunctive adverbs are *however*, *thus*, *therefore*, and *consequently*. Note that a comma usually follows the conjunctive adverb. You may find this quietly removed in some texts: modern practice favours *light* punctuation.

**c.) The semicolon serves as a major divider in a subdivided list:**

**Today's treatments include nitroglycerin, in the form of sprays, pills, pastes, and patches; plaque drills; arterial balloons; and new surgical procedures.**

A list is subdivided if at least one of its items has commas. The semicolons are used to mark every each item in the list above, even though only the first one actually has internal commas.

**d.) Colons**

Colons are abused almost as often as they are used. The colon has a limited function: it introduces an explanation, list, or amplification that follows a *complete* statement. This formal restriction on colon use is important: the colon must follow a *syntactically complete clause*. Often textbooks present short, bulleted lists with a colon following the verb:

**The four chief stressors affecting addiction are:**

- **social,**
- **medical,**
- **emotional,**
- **financial.**

The sentence, however, is incomplete if it ends with the verb *are*; this sentence requires a subject complement, and the list serves in exactly this capacity. Nevertheless, the practice is widespread (even in textbooks), and it may be pedantic to oppose it. Sometimes the rule against incomplete sentences encourages writers to complete the clause by adding "the following" ("The four chief stressors affecting addiction are the following"). This practice leads to stilted and wordy writing. Simple introductory statements can be concise *and* complete:

**Four chief stressors affect addiction:**

- **social,**
- **medical,**
- **emotional,**
- **financial.**

Note the use of punctuation with bullets. The *Chicago Manual of Style* considers bullets "cumbersome" and offers little comment on their use. In general, items that are syntactically part of a sentence can begin with lowercase letters and end with appropriate punctuation. The sentence above could be presented as a coherent statement without bullets:

**Four chief stressors affect addiction: social, medical, emotional, financial.**

If the bulleted or enumerated points do not combine with the introductory statement to form a complete sentence, omit end punctuation from the lines of the list.

## 8. Common Problems with Ineffective Quotations

These examples of common quotation problems have been drawn from both MLA format and APA format contexts. For more about formatting, visit our Quicknotes on essay formatting, or visit Quicknotes on punctuation for punctuation tips.

### Problem 1: Awkward formal introduction

Writers must take care to set up the quotation so that the sentence reads smoothly and naturally. The writer of the following passage was economical in selecting the cited material but composed carelessly, simply attaching the quotation to the end of a sentence.

Messner (2003) explained the purpose of his research this way: "My overarching purpose was to use feminist theories of masculine gender identity to explore how masculinity develops and changes as boys and men interact within the socially constructed world of organized sports" (p. 141).

### Solution 1: Avoiding formal introduction

The material could have been introduced much more naturally:

Messner (2003) studied athletes by using "feminist theories of masculine gender identity to explore how masculinity develops and changes as boys and men interact within the socially constructed world of organized sports" (p. 141).

### Problem 2: Unnecessary block quotation

Be selective and judicious when selecting text to cite. Quoting a chunk of text that is too large distracts the reader with details and causes him or her to lose the thread of your argument:

The townspeople make a grotesque discovery after Emily's death, as this passage shows:

What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay; and upon him and upon the pillow beside him lay that even coating of the patient and biding dust. Then we noticed that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head. One of us lifted something from it, and leaning forward, that faint and invisible dust dry and acrid in the nostrils, we saw a long strand of iron gray hair. (472-73)

Earlier it is established that the graying of Emily's hair followed Homer Barron's disappearance; therefore, the hair on the pillow indicates that Emily lay with his corpse.

The quotation is introduced awkwardly by the clumsy and obtrusive phrase "as this passage shows." Although the passage that follows is lengthy, it still fails to convey a crucial point, which must then be introduced at the end.

### **Solution 2: Avoiding unnecessary block quotation**

By extracting only necessary details from the source and by embedding them within the text of the paper, the writer can get to the point more quickly and smoothly.

The implications of the final scene are grotesque: the pillow beside Homer Barron's rotted body bore the imprint of a head, and here the townspeople found "a long strand of iron-gray hair" (473). Because Emily's hair became gray only after Homer's disappearance (471), she must have lain with his corpse.

### **Problem 3: Shift in person**

Shifts in grammatical person often develop across the boundary between a writer's text and an embedded quotation.

Discussing his RTN-grammar experiment, Hofstadter (2001) admits that "my choice of vocabulary was still aimed at producing humorous effects" (p. 623).

The sentence has a third-person subject, but the quotation begins with the first-person possessive pronoun, "my." Correct the problem by skillful omission of incompatible material.

### **Solution 3: Correcting a shift in person**

One way to correct the shift in person is to create agreement between the third-person subject and the possessive pronoun. Since the writer must change the "my" in Hofstadter's remark to "his", the changed word must be surrounded by square brackets.

In discussing his RTN-grammar experiment, Hofstadter (2001) observed that "[his] choice of vocabulary was still aimed at producing humorous effects" (p. 623).

A second way to correct the shift in person is to present Hofstadter's remark as direct speech:

In discussing his RTN-grammar experiment, Hofstadter (2001) admits, "My choice of vocabulary was still aimed at producing humorous effects" (p. 623).

#### **Problem 4: Ungoverned quotations**

Some writers simply place quoted sentences between sentences of their own. This is a weak way of linking argument and evidence.

Larry seemed to enjoy having his father appear only at long intervals, leaving him to monopolize his mother's affections. "The war was the most peaceful period of my life" ("My Oedipus Complex" 1322). His world changed when his father came home. "Life without my early morning conferences was unthinkable" (1325).

The reader is forced to supply connections between the writer's comments and the quoted material. While encouraging the reader's active participation, this abrupt, associative style quickly becomes annoying. It should be used only to emphasize unusually clear relationships.

#### **Solution 4: Subordinating quotations**

Specify the connections between ideas with suitable terms, and combine quoted fragments with explanatory material of your own. For example, Larry's changing situation can be stated concisely by combining embedded quotations with careful sentence structure:

Larry found the war "the most peaceful period of [his] life" ("My Oedipus Complex" 1322) because his father's absence let him monopolize his mother's affections. When his father returned and tried to end Larry's "early morning conferences" with his mother, the boy found the change "unthinkable" (1325)!

### **9. Misplaced/Dangling Modifier**

Remember the importance of *position* in English; be certain that modifiers are correctly placed and that the words they modify are present. This is not always an easy task; several constructions are inherently unstable.

**Precept:** *Place modifiers logically, ensuring that there is a suitable term to be modified.*



<p><b>Example:</b> A garish poster attracts the visitor's eye on the east wall.</p>	<p>Correction: A garish poster on the east wall attracts the visitor's eye.</p>
<p><b>Example:</b> Encouraged by the high rate of return, investing further seemed reasonable.</p>	<p>Correction: Encouraged by the high rate of return, we decided that further investment was reasonable. <b>Note:</b> Here, the problem is that the original sentence offers <i>no substantive</i> for the phrase "encouraged by the high rate of return" to modify. Who was encouraged? Normally, the subject of a participle in an introductory phrase <i>follows immediately after the phrase</i>.</p>
<p><b>Example:</b> Using a proxy server in a corporate environment, an alternative way can be provided to allow shared access to a single Internet connection.</p>	<p>Correction: Using a proxy server in a corporate environment, a company can provide shared access to a single Internet connection. <b>Note:</b> The use of the passive voice (<i>can be provided</i>) eliminates the subject that the phrase "using a proxy server" attempts to modify.</p>

## 10. Usage Errors: With regards to/In regards to/As regards

The phrases *in regards to* and *with regards to* are considered to be corruptions of *as regards* and *with regard to*. Perhaps the best solution is to use *regarding* whenever possible; it is shorter than either and usually less awkward. *With regards to* can be used to mean *best wishes to*, normally at the end of a letter, although the short form *regards* is far more common.

**Wrong:** The committee made several recommendations *with regards to* the Chair's report.

**Better:** The committee made several recommendations *with regard to* the Chair's report.  
The committee made several recommendations *regarding* the Chair's report.

**Better still:** Often the simple preposition *about* can replace these somewhat troublesome expressions.

For more information about how to spot common errors in your completed essay, visit the Quicknotes pages on wordiness and proofreading.