

As you complete this review, pay attention to the distinctions in **grammar** (which are errors that must be fixed), **syntax** (also errors that must be fixed but relate to clarity in meaning), and **style** (which are choices writers make to improve clarity and voice). When working with clients, you should be clear with them about the differences so that they understand the parameters of their choices as writers and the consequences of their choices.

Part 1 provides you with a review of punctuation and mechanic rules. **When editing sentences, one should always begin by fixing the most basic errors**—namely, incorrect punctuation and mechanics (e.g. a missing comma, run-on sentences, a proper noun that needs to be capitalized, a misused semicolon, etc.) before moving onto more complex errors, such as syntactical errors that often muddle intended meaning (see Part 2) and stylistic concerns that add interest to one's prose (see Part 3).

PART 1: GRAMMAR - PUNCTUATION AND MECHANICS

Punctuation:

Comma Abuse: More is Not Better:

Do not use commas in the following situations:

- To separate the subject from the verb in a clause or sentence.
Example: The retired cook, flipped the burgers in his sleep.
- To separate two or more verb or verb phrases in a compound predicate.
Example: Hemingway went to Spain, and wrote about bullfighting.
- To separate two or more nouns or noun phrases in a compound subject or compound object.
Example: Dean Smith argued that we – the physics department – don't need excessive funding for extensive experiments, and that we need to stop stealing silverware from the cafeteria for our experiments.
- To separate a dependent or subordinate clause that comes at the end of the sentence.
Example: I want to be a comedian, because I can make people laugh.

The Function of Commas: Use the highlight function in Word to highlight the appropriate comma(s) in each example.

1. Connect two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction: for, and, nor, but, or, yet.
Example: Aristotle develops a valid and concise argument, yet he commits the fallacy of composition when he justifies the necessity of a state.
2. Separate items in a list of words, phrases, or clauses (when there are no commas within the listed items).
Example: I ate two apples, a piece of cheese, and a porcupine for lunch.
3. Separate coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun.
Example: Professor Smith always wears that lurid, retro sweater.
4. Follow introductory words and phrases (infinitive, participle, or propositional) at the beginning of a sentence: Moreover, Therefore, Thus, Yes, No, Well, Please, However, Still, Yet, Oh, On.
Example: To develop a sophisticated taste for wine, a person must travel to different vineyards and associate with other wine snoots.
5. Follow a dependent or subordinate clause that comes at the beginning of a sentence.
Example: Because the sky is falling, meteors and UFOs are able to penetrate the atmosphere.

The Function of Semi-colons:

Between Two Independent Clauses of Equal Grammatical Rank

Semicolons are used between independent clauses not joined with a coordinating conjunction but only if both independent clauses have equal grammatical rank. When choosing between a comma with a coordinating conjunction and a semicolon, use a semicolon only if the relationship between the two independent clauses is clear.

Example: I don't care too much for money money can't buy me love.

Rewrite: I don't care too much for money; money can't buy me love.

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Fix this:

It's been a hard day's night I should be sleeping like a log.

A writer may also connect two independent clauses with a semicolon and a conjunctive adverb such as *however* or a transitional phrase such as *for example*.

Example: We are in a science course, so I should ideally use scientific terms, however, since I am an English major, we will be discussing the function of purple telomeres.

Rewrite: We are in a science course, so I should ideally use scientific terms; however, since I am an English major, we will be discussing the function of purple telomeres.

Fix this:

Purple telomeres did not spring from my imagination, rather, they are a by-product of exhaustion and excessive caffeine intake.

The Function of Colons:

Introduce an explanation, example, list or quotation. (Remember that what precedes the colon must be an independent clause.)

Example: As per the unwritten manual for college students, no homework can be accomplished without three things, procrastination, multitasking, and a sense of humor.

Rewrite: As per the unwritten manual for college students, no homework can be accomplished without three things: procrastination, multitasking, and a sense of humor.

Fix this:

My personal motto is simple give me levity, or give me death.

Punctuation errors:

Comma splice:

These errors occur when a comma is used without a coordinating conjunction. Some are hard to catch and often require a good dose of common sense. Comma splices are usually found in run-on sentences when students want to appear as if they know how to use commas. The best ways to correct these are to add a conjunction, use a semi-colon, or make two separate sentences. A good teaching method is to remember FANBOYS, or *for, and, nor, but, or, yet*, and so in order to remember the coordinating conjunctions that require a comma.

Example: Never disturb a gardener while she is at work, she will strike you with her trowel.

Rewrite: Never disturb a gardener while she is at work, for she will strike you with her trowel.

Fix this:

Gardening is a famously stress-free activity, its mental and physical health benefits are endless.

Apostrophe errors:

These are usually pretty obvious, but "its" and "it's" are common victims of misuse. It's a pet peeve of mine, and it should be a pet peeve of yours.

Example: James paper taught me why countries infrastructures matter.

Rewrite: James's paper taught me why countries' infrastructures matter.

Fix this:

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I tried spelunking, but its not as amusing as it's name suggests.

Quotation errors:

Quotations are used to enclose direct quotations and around titles of short works.

Example: Ernest Hemingway proves it's all about subtext in Hills Like White Elephants, a story in which two characters go to Spain and discuss alcohol intake to avoid their actual problems.

Rewrite: Ernest Hemingway proves it's all about subtext in "Hills Like White Elephants," a story in which two characters go to Spain and discuss alcohol intake to avoid their actual problems.

Fix this:

Having a Coke With You, a poem by Frank O'Hara, showcases poetic eccentricity with lines like, partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt.

Periods and commas belong inside quotation marks, and semicolons and colons belong outside. Question marks and exclamation points are trickier; they belong inside quotation marks unless they apply to the sentence as a whole.

Example: She said, "Revenge is a dish best served cold;" I told her I didn't care for sushi.

Rewrite: She said, "Revenge is a dish best served cold"; I told her I didn't care for sushi.

Example: We battled until morning, when she finally asked, "Breakfast"?

Rewrite: We battled until morning, when she finally asked, "Breakfast?"

Fix these:

According to Nietzsche, "he who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster".

"I've read *The Art of War*", she said. "I can predict your every move".

Mechanics:

Capitalization:

Remember that only proper names, proper nouns, titles, and the first word of a sentence require capitalization. Do not capitalize for emphasis, at the beginning of a clause, after a colon, or after a semicolon.

Example: Mr. miyagi caught the fly using CHOPSTICKS!

Rewrite: Mr. Miyagi caught the fly using chopsticks!

Fix this:

In his famous book orientalism, Edward Said argues that Literature is not free from Politics.

Numbers:

Write out all numbers that are fewer than two words.

Example: On average, I sleep 10 hours a night.

Rewrite: On average, I sleep ten hours a night.

Fix this:

In the United States, 1 out of 3 people eat two hundred and fifty thousand bugs every night.

If a sentence begins with a number, spell out the number or rewrite the sentence.

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Example: 25 people arrived for the ballet tryout armed with slippers, tutus, and unyielding ferocity.
Rewrite: Twenty-five people arrived for the ballet tryout armed with slippers, tutus, and unyielding ferocity.

Fix this: 12 clients scheduled an appointment for Friday. Sadly, none of them will wear tutus.

The Hyphen:

The hyphen is only used for compound words that are found in the dictionary or when two or more words function as an adjective.

Example: I would be truly lost without self adhesive labels.
Rewrite: I would be truly lost without self-adhesive labels.

Fix these:

I went on a field-trip to Nothingness and returned with a heightened sense of self awareness.

PART 2: SYNTAX (ERRORS THAT AFFECT CLARITY)

Subject Verb Agreement:

In simple sentences, subject-verb disagreement is easy to identify, but when a client writes complex sentences, it may be more difficult to see that the subject and the verb disagree. Remember that verbs agree with their subjects in number and in person (first, second, third). A good way to teach these syntactical disagreements is to have the client underline the subject and the verb and expose the incongruity.

Example: The unrestrained slaughter of dinosaurs for their beautiful hides have caused the dinosaur population to diminish.
Rewrite: The unrestrained slaughter of dinosaurs for their beautiful hides has caused the dinosaur population to diminish.

Fix this:

I have found that high levels of radioactive, alien toe fungus reduces the amount of cockroaches in my cellar.

Shifts in Point of View or Tense:

If the client uses a certain tense relatively well, then this type of error should be easy to spot. If, however, the entire paper is riddled with shifts in tense and point of view, it can get a little tricky to keep track. One should ask the client which tense/view they would like to keep, and you correct the paper with respect to that. The most common mistake you will see is the word "they" referring to a singular person.

Example: A student should remain calm, unless they discover a swarm of bees inside their bag.
Rewrite: A student should remain calm, unless he or she discovers a swarm of bees inside his or her bag.

Fix this: While Steinbeck wrote about communities and human compassion, Hemingway was writing about catching large fish.

Misplaced Modifier:

A misplaced modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that, when put in the wrong place in a sentence, changes the entire sentence's meaning. According to Hacker, the most commonly misplaced modifiers are only, even, almost, nearly, and just. These words should refer *directly* to the word they are modifying. If they are placed somewhere else in the sentence, it could change the entire meaning. Dangling modifiers can be a little trickier. Since they don't refer logically to anything in a sentence, we automatically substitute a meaning into the sentence for them to refer to. A sentence with a dangling modifier may seem correct only because we have made it so in our own minds.

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Example: I want to drum some statistics into your heads, which are concrete.

Rewrite: I want to drum some concrete statistics into your heads.

Fix these:

Speaking softly, the wind muffled his words.

Students only study on Sunday, leaving the rest of the week for procrastination.

She finally found the envelope on holiday in Bangkok with her family.

Parallel Structure:

Parallel structure exists when two or more parallel ideas are expressed in parallel grammatical form.

Example: I always desired to have a good life, write a book, and winning the Olympics.

Rewrite: I always desired to have a good life, to write a book, and to win a gold medal in the Olympics.

As you can see, the structure of the first sentence contains a list of things that have different structures: infinitive form, predicate form, and participle form; whereas the second example remains consistent in using the infinitive form. When dealing with parallel structure, remember the importance of consistency.

Fix these:

She likes piña coladas, getting caught in the rain, and does not do yoga.

Taking good notes is essential for remembering key information and to enhance doodling skills.

Eliminate Vague Pronouns:

Most people automatically think that *it* always refers to the previous sentence or their general topic, but more often than not, this short word must be fully explained so that a writer's precise meaning is clear.

Example: It caused the fire that burned down the Baudelaire orphans' house.

Rewrite: Count Olaf's wicked contraption caused the fire that burned down the Baudelaire orphans' house.

Fix this:

Lemony Snicket never fully explains the connections between his characters. It adds to the mystery of the VFD organization.

Eliminate Vague or Ambiguous Reference of This, That, It, or Which:

The words "this," "that," and "which" should always refer to a specific antecedent. To repair the problem, suggest a clarification or the addition of a following noun.

Example: The door was open while Korean pop was playing, which was very loud.

Rewrite: The door was open while Korean pop was playing loudly.

Fix this:

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Aside from its success in film production, Korea is known for its music industry. This is very popular across the globe.

PART 3: STYLE (Choices in writing that support a more sophisticated voice, increased clarity, and concision)

Avoid "To Be" Constructions:

Using "to be" not only bores, but it makes for a muddy point. Use active verbs to express points.

Example: It is said that John Winthrop was intrigued by the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Rewrite: The Massachusetts Bay Colony intrigued John Winthrop

Fix this:

Gluttony is considered a sin only by those who have never eaten pie.

Avoid Useless Modifiers:

Adverbs and adjectives can be useful at times, particularly when you're writing a story, but in academic papers, they are often uninformative and messy. Eliminate any that can be deemed unnecessary. Using nouns and active verbs is a much better solution.

Example: One fascinating point is that George Washington obviously never used Wikipedia.

Rewrite: George Washington never used Wikipedia.

Fix this:

Arguably, the best presidents and global leaders are definitely those who can do their online research very quickly and effectively.

Avoid Excessive Use of Prepositional / Inflated Phrases:

If you're looking to lengthen a paper, prepositional phrases are your best friend. Unfortunately, too many can get in the way of the point you are trying to make, so eliminate them.

Example: It is my belief that all people should evacuate Earth by means of interplanetary transportation in the event that an alien invasion occurs in their surrounding area.

Rewrite: If an alien invasion occurs, people should use interplanetary transportation to evacuate Earth.

Fix this:

The most important factor about the main character in the story is the fact that he is the only introvert in a world of extroverts.

Avoid Passive Voice:

In most cases, rewrite sentences in the passive voice so that they include active verbs as well as the active voice. To rewrite, identify who or what performed the action in the sentence and make that "do-er" the subject. You may also be able to recognize the passive voice based on the length of the sentence. If the action is done by someone instead of someone doing the action, then your sentence will probably be much longer.

Example: The budget was approved by the Board of Trustees.

Rewrite: The Board of Trustees approved the budget.

Fix this:

The decision that the president announced after little deliberation was that he would approve the bill for funding space travel.

Avoid Redundancy:

Redundancy makes papers overly wordy and suggests that the writer is trying to lengthen the paper.

Example: Dan is a student enrolled at Lake Forest College studying chemistry.

Rewrite: Dan is a chemistry student at Lake Forest College.

Fix this:

Dan is also a secret agent who operates covertly by taking chemistry courses when he is not investigating the Lake Forest College criminal underground in disguise.

Vary Sentence Structure

Often, writers unconsciously fall into a particular pattern in their sentence structure. They need readers (like Writing Center tutors) to help them see their patterns. There are three sorts of sentence structures you should teach to your client to aid in varying sentence structure: the simple sentence, the compound sentence, and the complex sentence. A simple sentence contains only an independent clause. A compound sentence consists of two independent clauses connected with a coordinating conjunction or a semicolon. A complex sentence is made up of at least one independent and dependent clause. Describe the differences between dependent and independent clauses (Hacker 243) and show clients patterns.

Most inexperienced college writers write "stringy" sentences—sentences with many independent clauses connected with coordinating conjunctions. Show clients how to embed subordinate information in modifying phrases. Encouraging the use of modifying phrases allows you to teach cool punctuation, like the semi-colon. Help clients write a sentence with a single, strong independent clause and effective modifiers. Practice in modifying constructions can lead to more sophisticated expression. Connecting main ideas with "and," "but," and "or" does not show very sophisticated logic or thinking. By subordinating information, the writer is forced to think through relationships between ideas and provide appropriate emphasis to key ideas.

Exercise:

Pick one of the two examples below and discuss the difference in meaning and effect of the two revisions.

Type Here:

1. I went to the store because I couldn't keep my mind on writing my paper because my boyfriend is a jerk and all I want to do is eat chocolate and forget about him.

Revised: I went to the store to buy chocolate to focus on my paper and forget about my jerky boyfriend.

Revised: Getting chocolate from the store was the only way to focus on my paper and forget my jerk of a boyfriend.

2. Getting good grades means a lot to me and I know that going to office hours is supposed to matter and still my grades do not improve.

Revised: My grades, which are very important to me, have not improved, despite my attending professors' office hours.

Revised: Despite attending office hours, I have not been able to improve my grades, which are very important to me.

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Subordinating Elements

The key to varying sentences for better clarity of meaning lies in learning to use different subordinating elements.

Try using:

1. An absolute phrase (a word group that modifies a whole clause or sentence, usually consisting of a noun followed by a participle or participle phrase)
Example: He was known to have written, cigarette in mouth, for hours at a time.
2. An appositive phrase (a noun or noun phrase that renames a nearby noun or pronoun)
Example: I often read Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, my favorite novel.
3. A prepositional phrase
Example: Over the river and through the woods, to grandmother's house we go.
4. A participial phrase (a phrase beginning with a past or present participle and ending with a noun or noun equivalent)
Example: Tossing and turning in bed, the young boy kept thinking about the hidden cookies.
5. A gerund phrase (a noun in verb form ending in -ing)
Example: Studying late at night, he decided, was made for people who love caffeine.
6. An infinitive phrase (an infinitive is the word "to" followed by a "verb")
Example: To talk to her mom without losing her temper was an accomplishment.
7. A dependent clause
Example: When he invaded the neighboring country, he witnessed the real cost of war.
8. An adjective clause
Example: I celebrated Christmas, which motivated me to decorate a tree and to play carols.
9. An adverb clause
Example: Unless she clarifies this assignment, I shall remain confused.
10. A noun clause
Example: The most exciting thing about the election was that people were motivated to vote.

Exercise:

Rewrite the following paragraph, using at least three of the elements described above.

The author compares the Iraq War to the Vietnam War. She states that both wars were caused by trigger-happy administrators, cultural misunderstanding, and clashing political ideology. The text includes examples from both wars. It gives descriptions of the terrain in which the soldiers fought. It also provides cultural and political history of both countries and compares the two on multiple levels. The multiple levels include government, religion, infrastructure, and economic relationship with the United States. The author presents similarities that are hard to argue.

Type Here:

Reduce or Eliminate Colloquial Language or Informal Language

The following paragraph has several instances of colloquial language; often, you can find these instances by noticing when two-to-four words are needed to explain one idea. After reading the paragraph, list the colloquial words and phrases. For each of these words/phrases, list at least two more formal, appropriate options that this client could use to replace it:

Exercise: The use of stem cells in medicine has come a long way in a relatively short period of time. Stem cells are now being used for treating athletic injuries that'd never been imagined of when stem cell research and the application of stem cells first began. There are those who follow stem cell research closely that see significant unethical issues with these medical advances applied to athletic injuries. On the flip side, there are just as many people (if not more) who see nothing wrong with these progressions in the medical world.

Type Here:

Application Exercise:

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The sentences below are grammatically correct but stylistically awkward and unclear. Identify the weakness in each sentence. Rewrite the following sentences and describe the “moves” or strategies you used (e.g. “I found the main subject and verb and then modified the verb; or “I underlined all the repeated words and then decided which ones to keep”).

1. Because the fluid, which was brown and poisonous, was dumped into the river, the company that was negligent had to shut down.
[Type Here:](#)
2. I love living in the city. I have a wonderful view of the entire city. I have a great apartment, and I can see the Golden Gate Bridge and many cargo ships pass under the bridge each day. I like the restaurants in San Francisco. I can find wonderful grub from just about every country. I don't like the traffic in the city.
[Type Here:](#)
3. At the meeting, there will be a report to the stockholders on the progress of the Company during the past year by the President.
[Type Here:](#)
4. The financial statements and related data presented elsewhere in this report have been prepared in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles, which require the measurement of financial position and operating results in terms of historical dollars without regard to changes in the relative purchasing power of money over time.
[Type Here:](#)
5. The play was very interesting and successful because it was short and to the point and did not bore the viewer and had great costumes and staging.
[Type Here:](#)