Freshman Writing Errors

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THE WRONG WORD

Homophones

Many errors involving the wrong word are the result of confusion caused by homophones. ***Homophones*** are words that sound the same but have different meanings and spellings. Here is a quick list of 10 of the most common homophone groups to make sure you get them right!

1. your/you're
2. there/they're/their
3. affect/effect
4. than/then
5. here/hear
6. accept/except
7. to/too/two
8. its/it's
9. aloud/allowed
10. break/brake

OVERUSING TEN-DOLLAR WORDS

'Ten-dollar words' are big words, fancy words—the words that you use to impress people. There is nothing wrong with big, fancy words; sometimes using the *right* big word really *can* impress your reader. But very often, developing writers are *trying* so hard to stack their essays with big, impressive words, and in the process they sacrifice precision. Then, the effect on the reader is not to impress, but to frustrate. Only use big words if they are the right big words.

For example:

- Florence is notorious for its plethora of churches.
- The organization donated unutilized writing implements to schools that necessitate them.

Notorious means famous for something bad, so it's strange to call a city notorious for its churches. ***Necessitate*** isn't exactly the same as ***need***. *Necessitate* is more like to *make something necessary*, rather than being *in need of* something.

Here are the same sentences rewritten with simpler (and, in these cases, better) words:

- Florence is famous for its many churches.
- The organization donated unused pencils to schools that need them.

As you build your vocabulary and use the new words that you learn, **impress your reader with the *precision* of your vocabulary choices, not the *fanciness* of your words**.

QUOTATION AND CITATION ERRORS

Incorporating ideas, findings, and quotations from the work of other scholars is an essential academic writing skill. Doing it wrong can be clumsy. Doing it really wrong can be plagiarism!

Missing Attributions

When you are reading and using the work of others to write a paper, the most important principle to understand when it comes to attribution and citation is that **you need to give credit for any ideas that are not yours**. This can apply to quoting exact words, but it also includes ideas and research. That's what ***attribution*** is: giving people credit for their work.

Sometimes students from other cultures are surprised by how important attribution is in U.S. academic culture. If you are studying at a university in the U.S., it is important to understand that we take attribution very seriously. If you include someone else's words or ideas in your writing without including a citation, this is called ***plagiarism***. In American universities it is considered the same as cheating or stealing someone's ideas. **In a university, you can fail your class and even be permanently expelled for plagiarism.** You should read your school's ***academic honesty policy*** to understand the expectations at your particular college.

Mechanical Errors in Citations

While attribution is a general practice of giving people credit where it is due, ***citation*** is *how* we do that. In practice, this often looks like putting the name and date of the work in parentheses in your text and at the end of your paper in a bibliography or works cited list. This usually involves some specific formatting, and it's really easy to make mechanical errors. In writing, ***mechanical errors*** are issues with spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.

There are different ways of doing this, different **citation styles**. These tend to change according to the discipline you are working in. For example, if you are writing a paper for an English literature class, you will probably be asked to use MLA style for your citations, but if you are working in the social sciences, you will probably have to use APA style.

Here's an example of an in-text citation in **MLA style**:

- "To err is human; to forgive, divine" (Pope 15).

And here's an example of an in-text citation in **APA style**:

- "He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret" (Freud, 1915, p. 142).

Notice that both MLA style and APA style require you to put the author's name and the page number in parentheses after a quotation (and before the period!). But also notice that APA style requires the year as well, commas between the elements of the citation, and the letter P and a period before the page number. These may seem like minor details, but you can lose points for getting them wrong in some classes!

Generally, your professor will tell you on their syllabus which style to use for your course. A fantastic resource for citations is Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab).

Not Using Your Own Words

Another important aspect of attribution is phrasing. When you are working with other people's ideas, you mostly want to try to summarize and paraphrase them in your own words.

Sometimes this isn't possible, though, and you need to use the author's original words. That is okay, but when you use someone else's words, even a combination of just a few words, you **must** use quotation marks. Look at your style guide to better understand other details about how to indicate when you are quoting someone else's words.

Lack of Integration

You also need to incorporate the quotation into a sentence of your own. That is, if you want to use this quote from Hamlet, you can't just put it into your paper as a sentence by itself. This would be wrong:

- Hamlet was thinking about suicide. "To be, or not to be."

You need some introductory text, like this:

- Hamlet was thinking about suicide. He asked himself, "To be, or not to be."

Skillful writers develop diverse ways to integrate quotations into their work so that the reader doesn't get bored!

UNCLEAR REFERENCES

You likely know that pronouns are an essential part of speech that make your writing flow more smoothly. But if you're not careful, pronouns can introduce ambiguity—lack of clarity—into your writing. In this sentence it's clear that the pronoun ***they*** refers to the noun ***cigarettes***, its antecedent:

- You shouldn't smoke cigarettes because they are unhealthy.

The reason it is clear is that *they* is a plural pronoun and there is only one plural noun (*cigarettes*) in the sentence before that plural pronoun. Generally, a pronoun refers back to the nearest previous noun that it agrees with (in terms of gender and plurality).

But take a look at this example:

- My father says we need really strict drug laws because they are really dangerous.

This unclear pronoun reference is a common problem in freshman writing. What does the pronoun ***they*** refer to? The writer probably means ***drugs*** but hasn't actually used the word ***drugs*** as a noun (in *drug laws*, *drug* works like an adjective). We can figure out what he means, but grammatically, this is a problem. Pronouns generally need to refer back to nouns that have already been said. Here is how we can fix the above example:

- My father says that, because drugs are so dangerous, we need to regulate them with strict laws.

Now that we have used the word ***drugs***, we can then use the pronoun ***them*** to refer back to it. The rule here is to **be sure that your pronouns have clear references that are in grammatical agreement.**

SPELLING

Spelling errors are extremely common in English. That is no surprise, because English spelling is so irregular.

Here is a list of 201 of the most commonly misspelled words in English. Study up!

COMMAS!

A whole lot of errors are related to missing commas. The tough thing about commas is that sometimes there is an inflexible rule that makes a comma either required or not allowed, and in other situations, it's your choice (we call this a ***style choice****)*.

Here's a breakdown of some of the most common ones.

Commas after Introductory Phrases

When you use a long introductory phrase in a sentence, a comma is often necessary to help your reader follow your sentence. Learn how to recognize the subject and main verb in your sentence. If you have a long phrase before that, consider adding a comma at the end of it. Take a look at this example:

- At the beginning of the class we introduced ourselves.

This sentence is a little disorienting for readers, because the introductory phrase (***At the beginning of the class***) is so long and the subject (***we***) comes so late. A comma can help the reader to recognize the end of that introductory phrase:

- At the beginning of the class, we introduced ourselves.

Unfortunately, there isn't a perfect rule for distinguishing a "long" introductory phrase from an acceptably short one. This is more of a style choice, but you should try to be conscious of how commas can help your reader to break up (or *parse*) your sentences. In general, you

can always choose to add a comma, even after a short introductory phrase (Like *in general* in this sentence!).

Commas for Restrictive Elements

This is a tricky one. The rule here is that **you don't put commas around restrictive elements in a sentence**. But what is a restrictive element!? A restrictive element is a part of a sentence that contains information that is essential to understanding or defining a noun. Here's an example:

- The Beatles' song "Yesterday" has been covered by many other musical artists.

In this case, "*Yesterday"* is a restrictive element. Why? Because **it is essential to the meaning** of *The Beatles' song*. If you removed *"Yesterday,"* the sentence wouldn't make sense.

- The Beatles' song has been covered by many other musical artists.

The Beatles' song isn't enough information. Your reader wants to know, "Which song?" because the Beatles had many songs. Since *Yesterday* is a restrictive element (essential to the meaning of *The Beatles' song*), **we do not put commas around it**. Compare that with this example:

- The Beatles' first album, *Please Please Me*, was a huge hit.

This example is different. We have already specified *The Beatles' <u>first</u> album*. They only have one first album, so the title of that album, *Please Please Me*, is not essential to understanding the sentence. It is not a restrictive element. The sentence works fine without it:

- The Beatles' first album was a huge hit.

For non-restrictive elements, we put commas before and after to show that this is extra information. The commas work like parentheses in this case. Here is one more example of a restrictive element (in this case a restrictive relative clause):

- The book that I bought yesterday is missing two pages!

If we took out *that I bought yesterday* this sentence would be missing something. The reader would ask Which book? So *that I bought yesterday* is a restrictive element and does not have commas around it. If we put commas around it, this is an error:

- The book, that I bought yesterday, is missing two pages!

Other Unnecessary Commas

Some people have been taught that you should use a comma where you would pause in a sentence. Sometimes this works out, but often it doesn't. This really isn't a very good rule for using commas, because people speak and pause in different ways, but commas do follow some rules!

One common mistake with unnecessary commas is to place a comma between the subject and the verb of a sentence. This example is wrong:

- That new movie with Brad Pitt, is on Netflix now!

The subject of your sentence is *movie*, but the full noun phrase for that subject is *that new movie with Brad Pitt.* Putting a comma between the subject and the verb (*is*) is a problem. This sentence should have no comma, like this:

- That new movie with Brad Pitt is on Netflix now!

RUN-ONS AND FRAGMENTS

Run-On Sentences

Run-on sentences are sentences that combine more than one independent clause without the necessary conjunction.
Here is a typical run-on sentence.:

- I really love windsurfing, the wind is in your hair, the sun is overhead, the sea beneath you feels solid and supportive.

In this example, all four clauses can simply be sentences on their own (they are ***independent clauses***). If you join more than one independent clause like this, with only commas, this is a special kind of run-on sentence called a ***comma splic*e.** So, one way to correct the run-on sentence above is to use periods and capital letters with each independent clause and turn this run-on into four separate sentences:

- I really love windsurfing. The wind is in your hair. The sun is overhead. The sea beneath you feels solid and supportive.

Of course, we do not usually write in short simple sentences like this, but this is one correct way to write these clauses. You could also join some of them with conjunctions:

- I really love windsurfing. The wind is in your hair, and the sun is overhead. The sea beneath you feels solid and supportive.

You can also join them all together into a single sentence, but you need conjunctions connecting them:

- I really love windsurfing because the wind is in your hair, the sun is overhead, and the sea beneath you feels solid and supportive.

Sentence Fragments

A sentence fragment is a string of words that is presented as a sentence (that is, written a capital letter and period like a sentence is) but is not actually a sentence. This is usually because it does not contain an independent clause, which is required in English to make a complete sentence. Here are a few examples of sentence fragments:

- Because we needed to feed the dog.
- Although the power was out.
- Seems like a lost cause.

- The symptoms of the disease, which causes rashes that need to be treated with steroids.

And here is how we can rewrite them as complete sentences:

- We had to go home because we needed to feed the dog.
- Although the power was out, we had a fun game night by candlelight
- That campaign seems like a lost cause.
- The symptoms of the disease, which causes rashes that need to be treated with steroids, also include headaches and difficulty breathing.

INFORMAL LANGUAGE IN A FORMAL CONTEXT

One of the most challenging aspects of English for many learners is that we use different ***registers***. This means that we use different types of language in different situations. In academic writing, we use a ***formal register***. That means we usually avoid certain aspects of informal English. Some examples of informal English are:

- contractions, especially *gonna, wanna, gotta*
- leaving out subjects in sentences
- less attention to "rules" about verb tenses and grammar
- use of slang, nonstandard spelling, and abbreviations

It is also important to recognize that the distinction between *formal* and *informal* English is not politically neutral or objective. Language and the "rules" for using it come from people, and people have biases. Ideas about formal and informal language can often be used to perpetuate racism, classism, and sexism, so it is worth looking critically at these rules.

SIMPLE PAST INSTEAD OF PRESENT PERFECT

Another extremely common issue has to do with verb tenses. In spoken English (especially in the U.S.) we often use the ***simple past tense*** in situations where the ***present perfec*t** is more standard. Here is an example:

- The wheat crop this year is smaller this year because it did not rain.
- We did not win for the last three seasons.

It is important to be clear here: the issue isn't that the examples above are *wrong*. It is that, by some more conventional standards, the present perfect is more acceptable. And very often professors will mark your paper against conventional standards, meaning they will mark sentences like those as wrong. Here are those examples rewritten to align with standard written English:

- The wheat crop this year is smaller this year because it has not rained.
- We have not won for the last three seasons.

You can read in more detail here about when we use the simple past and when we use the present perfect.

OVERUSE OF THE PASSIVE VOICE

This is a tricky one. Many developing writers *over*use the passive voice. They probably do this because they notice that, compared with their everyday English, formal academic English tends to use the passive voice more frequently, and it does. As we attempt to master a new form of the language, we sometimes overdo it a bit. So, it *is* good advice to be careful not to *overuse* the passive voice, and not to use the passive voice simply to sound more academic.

However, this reasonable advice has led to an oversimplified piece of bad advice: "Avoid the passive voice." The passive voice is a perfectly useful construction in English and is a legitimate choice for some situations. The basic principle here is similar to the principle for using big words above: Do not use the passive voice just to sound smarter. This will not make you sound smarter. Learn how the passive voice is used in English, and use it when it is appropriate for your purpose in writing.

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