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# MASTER GUIDE FOR GRAMMAR, MECHANICS AND ACADEMIC STYLE

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## Editing for Grammar and Mechanics

**Grammar/Mechanics in ENG 1113 and 1213:** Though ENG 1113 and 1213 do not teach grammar and mechanics, students must still show proficiency in order to pass (imagine not being able to do basic math in an Algebra class – you wouldn't expect to pass that, and the same applies here).

**Where to Find Rules on Grammar and Mechanics:** The class textbook provides rules and guidelines for any grammar and mechanical error. This handout points out the most common problems I focus on. However, this document may not cover everything I have identified in your paper as an issue. You are to use the textbook, tutors, online writing labs like the Purdue OWL, and me if you have more questions.

**Editing vs. Revising:** The first important step to creating a strong paper is understanding the differences between editing and revising.

- Editing involves correcting errors in grammar and mechanics, checking for MLA formatting errors, and other similar elements.
- Revising involves the ideas expressed in the paper – the position you took on the issue, the examples you used, the order you presented information in, etc. It means “re-seeing” (hence the word “vision” in revision) your paper.
- Revision comes first in the process for the very practical reason that if you have not completed the actual content, then you are wasting time correcting the grammar and mechanics of that content. Since revision involves sometimes changing what you've said or how you've said it, you shouldn't worry about grammar until afterwards.

## Point of View (POV)

**Defining the Three POV's:** There are three POV: 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>. Each of these is also available in singular and plural versions. Rhetorically, POV can make or break a paper since it involves how the writer is connecting to the reader. The wrong POV can come across as preachy, judgmental, patronizing, or too intimate. Inconsistent POV can be confusing. Understanding the different types of POV and how to use them rhetorically to gain your audience's trust and establish credibility are vital parts of being a skilled writer (or speaker).

## First Person POV (I, me, mine, we, us, ours)

Though acceptable in personal and professional essays, 1<sup>st</sup> person singular is rarely acceptable in academic writing. The default is always 3<sup>rd</sup> person POV unless the teacher specifies otherwise. 1<sup>st</sup> person singular is redundant and lacks credibility. Essays are by their very nature the writer's point of view, so adding lines like “I think” or “I believe” are unnecessary. And for academic papers, the use of personal experience is often insufficient to support a point. Writers should find the experiences of others in research to use rather than their own experience – this shows that the point they are making goes beyond their own views and provides readers ways to verify the issue the writer is discussing (they can find the same research and read about it for themselves).

## Second Person POV (You, Your)

2<sup>nd</sup> person singular and plural (you, your): Rarely will writers find opportunities to use “you” in academic writing. This POV is difficult because it points a rhetorical finger at readers and can make accusations and assumptions about readers’ beliefs and actions which may be offensive. Since the purpose of rhetoric is to persuade, writers must find ways to tear down the barriers between them and their readers, not add to them. Second person also includes imperative sentences that use the Understood You (e.g. Take this advice. – the subject of this sentence is “you”).

## Third Person POV (He, she, it, they, them, their)

- **Objectivity:** Academic writing prefers the more objective stance of 3<sup>rd</sup> person. Using 3<sup>rd</sup> person distances both the writer and the reader from the issue or group under discussion in the essay. Like a scientist and observers looking at a specimen under the microscope, 3<sup>rd</sup> person presents information in a way that underscores the analytical approach.
- **Why 1st and 2nd POV Is Limited:** Because academic writing teaches students to research and look beyond their own experiences and perceptions about things, the use of first person is mostly prohibited to papers that specifically ask for self-analysis or evaluation. Second person POV is prohibited because it makes assumptions about the reader and can come across as accusatory or preachy, like a wagging finger in the face. Third person POV, though, speaks about the issue from a distance that allows the reader and writer to consider it separate from themselves – a more objective and analytical perspective.
- **Verifiable:** The use of 3<sup>rd</sup> person examples rather than 1<sup>st</sup> person also shows the reader that the writer has investigated the subject and can produce verifiable evidence. By this, I mean that these examples should be from public sources so the reader can investigate firsthand should that be necessary.
- **Credibility:** If the writer uses examples purely from his/her own life and observations, the reader must rely 100% on trust. If the author has serious credentials and a known reputation, then that could be okay. However, if this is not the case, then the reader has no reason to trust the writer’s experience as being significant enough to merit him/her basing an argument on.
- **Caution:** Though 3<sup>rd</sup> person seems objective, if writers use it only for the appearance of objectivity rather than truly distancing themselves from the issue in order to analyze it from multiple perspectives, then the overall argument will still be plagued by first person filtering. Academic writing demands research and a scientific methods approach so that writers can be sure they have not let personal bias or opinion blind them to the truth or a more reasonable and rational position.
- **Revising:** Writers can quickly find POV errors by using the FIND function in word processing programs. In Word, go to FIND and simply type in the particular pronoun, like I or You. To filter out parts of words (like the “I” in “like”), click the box that says “find whole words only.” You also do not want to “match case” since that would only find pronouns that either have lower or upper case, depending on how you typed in the word. A *second approach* is to use the Grammar checker. You can customize proofing options under the STYLE selections in the Grammar check by searching for 1<sup>st</sup> person use. At this time, though, it will not check for 2<sup>nd</sup> person.

## Passive Voice (PV) and Active Voice

- Passive and Active Voice are not about verb tense. They identify who is in control in a sentence and have much more to do with subjects than verbs.
- Passive Voice always involves a form of “to be” (is, am, are, was, were, be, being, been) and the past tense of the verb it is helping. This makes Passive Voice easy to identify, and most grammar checkers usually do a good job of catching it in papers (be sure your grammar options are set to check this. Word’s grammar options list this as “passive sentences” under the STYLE section. Use HELP to find out how to change proofing options).
- In PV, the subject of the sentence is not carrying out the action of the verb. Instead, the verb is acting ON the subject (meaning the subject is passive). Problems arise when this makes the sentence wordy or the actual actor in the sentence is missing and unclear.
- MLA style prefers Active Voice (AV), but other disciplines (such as Science) often prefer Passive Voice. When you are writing for other classes, take note of the accepted or preferred style in that kind of writing, and adjust your choices.
- Though not grammatically incorrect, Passive Voice can lead to problems with clarity and conciseness. The examples below show PV and how to fix it:
  - PV: The window was broken. *Was broken* is the passive voice. Who or what broke it?  
AV: Bill broke the window. Active voice shows who broke it and puts that as the subject.
  - PV: Something should be done about this problem. *Should be done* is the PV – what should be done? Who should do it?  
AV: The city council should fix this problem.
- Strategy: Use Word’s Grammar Checker to find PV. Use the HELP function to find out how to customize Grammar and Spell Check settings and be sure to have the program check for “passive sentences.”

## Sentence Boundary Errors

**What Is a Sentence?** To understand many errors in punctuation or sentence structure, students must know what a sentence is and can include. The textbook provides all this information if you need a refresher. Here, I will provide some basic definitions and explanations.

- **Sentences come in 4 standard types:** simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. These types require a certain number of clauses and phrases with appropriate

punctuation. Creating great sentences requires you know how these parts work together effectively and grammatically.

## Clauses

- A clause requires a subject and a verb.
- A clause comes in two types: independent and dependent.
- An **independent clause** presents a subject and a verb that complete a thought. For example: Bill slept.
  - A **dependent clause** presents a subject and a verb that do not complete a thought (they are dependent on more information to complete the thought). Usually, they begin with a **subordinate conjunction**. These include: After, although, as, as if, as long as, as much as, as soon as, as though, because, before, by the time, even if, even though, if, in order that, in case, in the event that, lest, now that, once, only, only if, provided that, since, so, supposing, that, than, though, till, unless, until, when, whenever, where, whereas, wherever, whether or not, while.
- For Example:
  - After Bill slept. *This is incomplete because we don't know what happened "after" – we need more information.*
  - After Bill slept, he went to the movies. *This sentence completes the thought and is now independent.*

## Phrases

- A phrase is a group of related words, sometimes with a noun or a verb. Note: a subject is always a noun, but a noun is not always the subject of the sentence. Phrases have nouns but not subjects. Some phrases, though, like a Gerund, can function as the subject of a sentence: Eating ice cream on a hot day is refreshing. "Eating ice cream" is a gerund that functions as the subject here with "is refreshing" as the verb.
- Phrases modify other parts of a sentence by telling us more about them.
- Some types of phrases include prepositional, adjective, adverb, verb, noun. See your textbook for explanations and examples of phrases. You can also go to <http://grammar.about.com/od/pg/g/phrase.htm> for examples of different phrase types.

## Sentence Types

The number and types of clauses and phrases in a sentence determine which one of the four sentence types it is.

**Simple Sentence:** 1 independent clause (IC). The simple sentence can also include phrases. All of the following are examples of simple sentences.

- Bill slept.
- Bill slept on the couch.

- After eating, Bill slept until morning.

Beware of fragments: phrases that cannot stand on their own because they lack a subject, verb, or both. The types of phrases are:

- A **gerund phrase** functions as a noun. It begins with a verb ending in –ing:
  - *Example: **Knowing she had to decide** was driving Lucinda insane.*
- An **infinitive phrase** includes an infinitive (a verb beginning with “to”) and its objects, complements, and modifiers. It can function as an adjective, adverb, or noun:
  - *Adjective: Example: The Pacific Coast is the place **to be**.*
  - *Adverb: Example: She went **to pay** her taxes.*
  - *Noun: Example: **To be young again** is all I want.*
- A **noun phrase** includes a noun and its modifiers
  - *Example: **A long, rough road** crossed the barren desert.*
- A **participial phrase** includes a present participle (always ending in –ing) or past participle (usually ending in –ed unless verb is irregular) and its objects, complements, or modifiers. It functions as an adjective.
  - *Present Participle Example: **Absentmindedly climbing** the stairs, he stumbled.*
  - *Past Participle Example: Students **interested in math** can join the Mu Alpha Theta honor society for high schools and two-year colleges.*
- A **prepositional phrase** is introduced by a preposition and ends with a noun or pronoun, called the object of the preposition. It can function as an adjective, adverb, or noun:
  - *Adjective: Example: The gas **in the laboratory** was leaking.*
  - *Adverb: Example: The firefighters went **to the lab** to check.*
  - *Noun: Example: The smell came **from inside the wall**.*
- A **verb phrase** is composed of a main verb and one or more auxiliaries, acting as a single verb in the sentence predicate:
  - *Example: I **should have come** to the review session.*

**Compound Sentence:** A compound sentence requires at least 2 independent clauses (IC) that the writer can join in one of 4 different patterns.

**Pattern 1** (most common): With a comma plus a coordinating conjunction (CC). The sentence combination pattern is: IC + , + CC + IC.

- Coordinating conjunctions: and, or, nor for, yet, but, so
- Coordination shows the relationship between equally important ideas, and that is why it is used to combine 2 independent clauses.
- *Example:* Bill slept, but he was still tired.
- Each CC has a distinct meaning, and writers must use the best word to show the relationship between the 2 ICs.

**Pattern 2:** Uses a semicolon, conjunctive adverb, and a comma to join the sentences. The sentence combination pattern is: IC + ; + CA + IC.

- Conjunctive adverbs include: accordingly, also, besides, consequently, conversely, finally, furthermore, hence, however, indeed, instead, likewise, meanwhile, moreover, nevertheless, next, nonetheless, otherwise, similarly, still, subsequently, then, therefore, thus.
- *Example:* Bill was exhausted; however, he still got up at 6:00 to get ready for work.
- Conjunctive adverbs can also function as adverbs set off by commas. The difference between this and other adverbs: adverbs usually modify single word and cannot be placed anywhere in the sentence, but conjunctive adverbs modify the entire sentence and can be moved to different places without causing confusion.

*Examples:*

- Misty thought popcorn salad was disgusting. However, it was her grandma's favorite, so she made it for dinner. OR
- Misty thought popcorn salad was disgusting. It was, however, her grandma's favorite, so she made it for dinner. OR
- Misty thought popcorn salad was disgusting. It was her grandmother's favorite, however, so she made it for dinner.
- Conjunctive adverbs at the beginning of sentences can communicate that the sentence it begins is added to the previous one to show contrast, concession, summary, addition, reinforcement, time, or juxtaposition. In this case, it is set off by a comma (since it precedes the independent clause).
- *Example:* Joe had an exam in History. Consequently, he studied until midnight.

**Pattern 3:** Uses a semicolon to combine the clauses (usually only 2 in this pattern). The sentence combination pattern is: IC + ; + IC

- *Example:* Bill slept; he was still tired.
- Limitations on using this pattern: Writers should use this method rarely and only when the relationship between the 2 ICs is crystal clear (thus not needing the coordinating conjunction).

**Pattern 4:** Uses a colon to combine the clauses (usually only 2 in this pattern). The sentence combination pattern is: IC + : + IC

- The relationship implied by the second clause is usually one of example, clarification, or a quote.
- *Example:* His wife's news stunned Bill: they had not planned the pregnancy.
- This pattern can also be used to set off a quote from an IC: Dr. Marris explained the importance of testing: "If a test reveals the presence of the virus, patients have a 97% recovery rate through therapy."
  - This is a different pattern than if the quote completes the sentence grammatically: Dr. Marris explained that the testing was important because "[i]f a test reveals the presence of the virus, patients have a 97% recovery rate through therapy."

**Complex Sentence:** A complex sentence has 1 independent clause (IC) and at least 1 dependent clause (DC) plus any number of phrases. The two patterns are:

**Pattern 1:** IC + DC.

- *Example:* Bill decided to drive home although the weather was dangerous.

**Pattern 2:** DC + , + IC.

- *Example:* Although the weather was dangerous, Bill decided to drive home.
- Dependent clauses use **subordinating conjunctions** (SC) to make the clause incomplete. These include words like: if, since, after, while, because, and although (for a longer list, check your textbook or the Internet). Because these words are adverbs, we call this kind of subordination an adverb clause.
- Dependent clauses also use adjective and noun clauses. For more information, check your textbook or this web site: <http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/dependclterm.htm>
- If the dependent clause comes AFTER the IC, then you need no punctuation (unless using certain types of non-restrictive clauses and phrases). If it comes BEFORE the IC, you **always** need a comma to indicate where the IC begins.
- An explanation of restrictive and nonrestrictive phrases: <https://www.englishgrammar101.com/module-9/verbals-and-phrases/lesson-3/restrictive-and-nonrestrictive-participial-phrases>

**NOTE:** Generally, if anything comes before the independent clause in a sentence, we set it off with a comma.

**Compound-Complex Sentence:** Since a compound sentence needs at least 2 independent clauses, and a complex sentence needs at least 1 dependent clause, then a compound-complex sentence requires 2 or more independent clauses (joined by the rules of compounding) plus 1 or more dependent clauses (joined by the rules of subordination).

**Patterns with Examples:**

- IC + , CC + IC + DC.
  - *Example:* Bill slept, but he was still tired because the neighbor's dog kept waking him up.
- DC + , + IC + , CC + IC.
  - *Example:* Because the neighbor's dog kept barking all night, Bill was still tired, but he slept eight hours.

## Common Sentence Errors

### Fragments

- A fragment is an incomplete thought – missing some component that lets it stand alone. Fragments can be missing a subject or a verb, or they can have a subordinate word or phrase added that requires more information to complete the thought.
  - *Example:* After Bill slept.
  - *Example:* While asleep in the early morning.
- Fixing fragments means understanding what a sentence is and finding what makes it incomplete. The textbook provides examples of common fragment errors and how to fix them.
- Word’s Grammar Checker can help identify fragments, but it is not always accurate when it identifies sentence structure errors. Use it as a tool, but always consider the sentence and determine if you’ve actually made an error.

### Comma Splices and Run-ons (Fused Sentence)

Writers often create problems when they do not combine sentences correctly. With compound sentences, the errors are usually either comma splices (CS) or run-ons (RO).

- **Comma Splice (CS):** The compound sentence is missing the coordinating conjunction and is only held together (spliced) by a comma:
  - CS: Bill slept, he was still tired.
  - Correct: Bill slept, but he was still tired.
- **Run-Ons (RO):** Also called a Fused Sentence, this error involves a compound sentence that is missing either the comma but includes the coordinating conjunction, or it is missing both. The result is that the 2 sentences run together:
  - RO: Bill slept but he was still tired. (*Missing the comma*)
  - RO: Bill slept he was tired. (*Missing both the comma and the coordinating conjunction*).

### Misused or Missing Comma

The most common error with complex sentences involves missing or incorrect comma use.

- **Comma after an introductory clause or phrase:** If any clause or phrase comes BEFORE the independent clause in a complex sentence, the writer uses a comma to set it off.
- Examples:
  - After Bill’s wife told him her news, she sat down.
  - Finally home, Bill slept.
- **Commas setting off clause or phrase AFTER the independent clause:** Depending on the necessity of the information in this dependent clause or phrase, the sentence may require a comma. Look up restrictive (necessary) and nonrestrictive (not necessary) phrases for more information. In the example below, because the information in the dependent clause is necessary to understand when she sat, a comma is not necessary.
- Example of restrictive clause: Bill’s wife sat down after she told him the news.

- Example of nonrestrictive clause: Bill's wife sat down, in the floral chair, after she told him the news.

## Conciseness / Wordiness (W)

**Conciseness** refers to the efficiency and precision of your writing, not the number of words you actually use.

**Wordiness (W)** can result from ambiguous or imprecise diction. Correcting this can sometimes result in longer sentences. In the example below, the words *some*, *things*, *really* and *good* are ambiguous and imprecise. Replacing them with specific words will create a longer but more concise sentence.

- *W*: Some things make us feel really good.  
*Concise*: Eating ice cream, listen to a favorite song, or spending time with a friend can lift our spirits.

**Expletives:** *There is*, *There are*, and *It is* are common phrases writers use to begin sentences, but most of the time, these are just fillers rather than the actual subject and verb of the sentence.

- *W*: There are many times when I feel blue.  
*C*: Many times, I feel blue.
- *W*: It is a fact that sleeping too much can shorten one's life span.  
*C*: Sleeping too much can shorten one's life span.

## Using words of subjective rather than objective value to measure:

- *W*: He was really tall.  
*C*: He was 6'4".
- *W*: That ride was very scary.  
*C*: The roller coaster at the county fair shook so much that I thought the car was going to jump the tracks.

## Using words that have no value or add nothing to the sentence:

- *W*: We are pretty much done here.  
*C*: We are done.

## Redundant words:

- *W*: The test review was absolutely essential to passing the exam.  
*C*: The test review was essential to passing the exam.

### **Repetitive language (especially in close proximity):**

- W: Using offensive words, his use of profanity offended his listeners.
- C: His profanity offended listeners.

**Rhetorical Repetition:** Some repetition is rhetorically powerful. An example of this is the ending of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech:

This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

Here, Dr. King uses repetition to build intensity, making sure his structures are parallel in form (to work, to pray, to struggle, etc.).

For formal rhetorical techniques in using repetition in powerful ways, check out <http://grammar.about.com/od/rhetoricstyle/a/effectrepet.htm>

**More Help on Conciseness:** For more information on different errors or writing choices that result in wordiness, look in your textbook under Conciseness, or check out these web pages:

- <http://grammar.about.com/od/words/a/redundancies.htm>
- [http://grammar.about.com/od/words/tp/clutter\\_tips.htm](http://grammar.about.com/od/words/tp/clutter_tips.htm)
- <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/572/1/>
- <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/635/1/>
- <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/conciseness-handout/>

**Strategy:** Word also provides some help through the Grammar checker. Be sure to check the box for Wordiness under STYLE options.

## **Final Thoughts**

- Style is difficult to teach because it involves a complicated mixture of diction, tone, phrasing, etc. Diction: This involves the words you use. Have you chosen a college-level vocabulary, avoided slang, jargon and cliché, and picked the best word or words?
- Many writers in an effort to *sound* more credible often overwrite by using big words and phrases. This usually causes more harm because sentences can become difficult to read.
- Remember: Academic writing likes simple, straightforward language use. "Simple" is different than "simplistic." The point is to communicate your message quickly and effectively but still maintain a formal and adult tone.
- The University of North Carolina has a great article on style here <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/style/>. I recommend you read it if I have

commented on wordiness, overwriting, details (too many or too few), simplifying, or repetition on your paper.

- Paul Roberts “How to Say Nothing in 500 Words” and Kurt Vonnegut’s “How to Write with Style” are both helpful articles about writing with clarity and conciseness. Roberts’ essay is specifically about college freshman composition papers, and Vonnegut deals more with professional writing (but his advice is still applicable to all good writing). These are available in your textbook but also online at the following links:
  - Paul Roberts: <http://www.mrgunnar.net/ap.cfm?subpage=348270>
  - Kurt Vonnegut: <http://mentalfloss.com/article/60388/writing-advice-kurt-vonnegut-and-3-other-writers>