

Second Proofreading Workshop: Common Errors Review Hand-Out First-Year Writing Program Montclair State University

1. **Re-read your paper after you have finished using spell-check.** Twenty-five years ago the most common error was spelling. Today the most common error is word choice. Students are submitting papers with the word "apgar" when they mean "after," simply because spell-check has guessed wrong about the spelling. Like it or not, there is no substitute for re-reading. This is not to say that you shouldn't use spell-check, but that it can't constitute the final "read." Finally, though few students are willing to take the advice, you are guaranteed to catch more errors if you read your paper aloud rather than silently.

2. **Check for most common errors.** Here are some of the most common:

A. **Comma errors.** The most common comma errors occur when writers fail to place a comma after an introductory element, as in, "Although at first I found the Marquez's argument compelling, after reading the critique by Jones I become convinced that Marquez was missing the point." If you have had problems with commas, review the comma section in your handbook. Other very common comma errors are missing commas in compound sentences (sentences with *and*, *but*, *so*, *yet*, *or*, *nor*, or *for*), and missing commas with a nonrestrictive element, i.e., leaving out commas for phrases that are not essential to a sentence's meaning. (For example, a comma is required in the following: "Anna Quindlen, a columnist for Newsweek, writes compellingly on the subject of same-sex parenting.")

B. **Vague pronoun reference.** Pronouns replace words so that the replaced word (antecedent) doesn't have to be repeated again and again. We use pronouns all the time, as in, "In Rich's essay *she* uses narrative to illustrate complicated ideas about gender inequality." In this sentence, *she* is the pronoun; we're glad to have it used here because we didn't need to read, "In Rich's essay Rich uses narrative to illustrate...." That's clumsy sounding. However, frequently writers (and speakers) overuse pronouns. They write *he*, *she*, *it*, *they*, *this*, *that*, *which* and *who* in ways that are not clear. Readers can't actually figure out what *he* refers to (what the antecedent is) when pronouns are used inappropriately. Here's an example: "U.S. law prohibits illegal immigration, *which* many citizens support." Here the use of *which* is inappropriate. As readers we don't know if citizens support illegal immigration or the law that prohibits illegal immigration.

If you have this problem with vague pronouns, go back through your paper and highlight every time you use a pronoun (see list above, in italics). Then, re-read the essay and judge each highlighted pronoun: is the meaning completely clear? For more examples of over-use of pronouns, see your handbook under pronoun reference.

C. **Comma splices (often called run-ons).** A comma splice is when a writer uses a comma to fuse together two complete, independent clauses (or thoughts). Comma splices are corrected by substituting the comma with a semi-colon or period, adding a conjunction word like *and* after the comma, or by re-arranging the sentence entirely. If you have a problem with comma splices or run-ons, you need to review the entire section in your handbook so you can spot and correct these errors.

D. Sentence fragment. A fragment lacks a subject, a verb, or possibly both. Or, a fragment can begin with a subordinating word which suggests that what is written is just a dependent clause, dependent on another clause for completion. The best way to spot a sentence fragment is to read the sentence all alone, without first reading the one that precedes it or the one that follows. Writers of sentence fragments don't realize what they've done because they're proofreading by reading very quickly, not really noticing when they have a period (or semi-colon), indicating the presence of a complete (not fragment) sentence.

E. Incorrect tense shift. Often through revision writers will switch tenses, as from the present to past, without realizing that they have made the switch in the middle of a sentence or paragraph. Example: "President Bush was president for seven years; during this time he is becoming ever-less popular." Again, if you have this problem, highlight all the verbs and then go back and analyze what tense you should use. The most important principle to remember is to be consistent.

F. Missing or misplaced apostrophe ('). This is a very common error. To make a noun possessive, you have to use an apostrophe, unless you are using a personal pronoun (*hers, his its ours, or yours*). Correct: "The car's backseat was boiling hot." Incorrect: "The cars' backseat was boiling hot," and "The cars backseat was boiling hot." The first incorrect sentence seems to suggest that the writer is referring to more than one car, and the second incorrect sentence is simply confusing. If you make this error, you need to highlight every word that ends with s and then go back and stare at each word, asking yourself, "Is this a case of possessive?" Or, more easily, "Does something "own" something here?" Here's a trick. If you can re-arrange the words to use of, you have a case of the possessive, as in "The backseat of the car was boiling hot."

Most first-year students enter college making many errors, though often it is the case that writers are making only a few errors a dozen times or more! The good news is that this means that most students only have three, four, maybe five major errors that they need to figure out, learn to correct, and slowly internalize. The problem is that no one can really teach this to writers. Rather, writers have to sit down and figure out the logic of the error; teachers can help explain the error, but the slow and important process of really getting it is a matter of thinking and correcting. In time the error will no longer be tempting; the student will have re-trained her/his brain to avoid the problem of, for example, writing fragment sentences. It's almost like a rhythm; once you know it you don't have to read the notes on the sheet music because it's just ingrained in your head.

Once you discover that you can learn, that you can write more clearly more easily, you will find there's some pleasure in tackling and conquering a new writing error--whether it's finally figuring out what a dangling modifier is or how to avoid ending sentences with prepositional phrases. But these problems are higher order concerns: start with the most glaring and frequent errors, and work from there.

Drawn in part from Andrea Lunsford's *The Everyday Writer*, 3rd edition. New York: Bedford/St. Martin, 2005.
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