

THE BASICS

The following rules are *basic* for college writers. Section numbers in parentheses refer to Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers' *Rules for Writers*, 8th edition; bracketed information indicates my shorthand for the error. Of course, these are not the only rules of grammar and punctuation, but mastering these ten will move you that much closer to your goal of becoming more effective writers in academe. Good grammar is invisible because clarity is unobtrusive. You want your writing to grab readers' attention, but not because it is garbled. Good writing is clear, concrete, concise, and compelling. No one will ever look at your writing and say, "Hmmm. This is a little too clear; could you muck it up a bit for me, please?" Like it or not, you will be judged by how you write. Mastering the Basics should make that judgment more favorable.

1. Please write complete sentences. The simple English sentence contains a subject and a complete verb. Compound and complex sentences combine clauses and must contain appropriate conjunctions and punctuation. Do not write fragments, even stylistic ones, in academic prose.

[Frag] Revise sentence fragments into complete sentences. (19)

NO Academic writing should not include fragments. To avoid informality.

YES To avoid informality, academic writing should not include fragments.
Academic writing should not include fragments—to avoid informality.

[FS or CS] Avoid run-on (fused) sentences and comma splices. (20)

NO Writing well is a habit it is a matter of consistent revision.
Writing well is a habit, it is a matter of consistent revision.

YES Writing well is a habit, for it is a matter of consistent revision.
Writing well is a habit; it is a matter of consistent revision.
Writing well is a habit, a matter of consistent revision.

2. Please make subjects and verbs agree.

[S/V Agr] Avoid errors in subject/verb agreement. (21)

NO A singular subject demand a singular verb.

YES A singular subject demands a singular verb.

NO Everyone have problems with grammar occasionally.

YES Everyone has problems with grammar occasionally.

[Shift] Avoid illogical shifts in verb tense. Be consistent. Use the tense that best expresses an idea or logically completes a thought. (27F)

NO Whenever Molly phoned, her husband tries to listen attentively.

YES Whenever Molly phoned, her husband tried to listen attentively.

3. Please write so that pronouns have clear, logical references .

[Pro Ref] Avoid vague pronoun reference; provide a clear, logical antecedent. (23) [Watch out for the orphaned *this, they, it*; go on a *which* hunt.]

NO In some European restaurants, they add the tip to the bill yet give poor service.

YES The waiters in some European restaurants add the tip to the bill yet give poor service.

NO Pat always wanted to be a television newscaster; thus, she majored in it in college.

YES Pat always wanted to be a television newscaster; thus, she majored in telecommunications in college.

[Pro Agr] Avoid errors in pronoun/antecedent agreement. (22)

NO A singular pronoun must agree with their antecedent.

YES A singular pronoun must agree with its antecedent.

NO Did everyone bring their bathing suit to the soiree?

YES Did everyone bring his or her bathing suit to the soiree?

4. Please write so that pronouns function logically as subjects or objects in their sentences. [“Knock knock.” “Who’s there?” “Slap.” “Slap who?” “Slap *whom*, silly.”]

[Pro Case] Avoid faulty pronoun case. (24)

NO Just between you and I, pronouns are the least of my Basics worries.

YES Just between you and me, pronouns are the least of my Basics worries.

NO Do you think it was Ozzie whom dried the poodle in the microwave?

YES Do you think it was Ozzie who dried the poodle in the microwave?

5. Please write with parallel structure to reinforce a close relationship between compound sentence elements--whether words, phrases, or clauses.

[//ism] Avoid faulty parallelism. (9)

NO Mavis enjoys eating Twinkies, drinking Red Bull, and to listen to Pandora.

YES Mavis enjoys eating Twinkies, drinking Red Bull, and listening to Pandora.

6. Please use quotation marks correctly. (37)

NO Edgar Allan Poe was often asked to read *The Raven* at public events.

YES Edgar Allan Poe was often asked to read “The Raven” at public events.

NO The student asked when should I use quotation marks?

YES The student asked, “When should I use quotation marks?”

NO Title of student essay: “How the 2016 Election Ushered in the Apocalypse”

YES Title of student essay: How the 2016 Election Ushered in the Apocalypse

7. Please write so that modifiers logically connect with the words they modify.

[MM or DM] Avoid misplaced or dangling modifiers. (12)

- NO Matilda entered the church with her father wearing her mother's gown.
YES Wearing her mother's gown, Matilda entered the church with her father.
- NO Driving around the corner, the Spring Creek campus came into view.
YES Driving around the corner, we saw the Spring Creek campus come into view.
- NO To do well in this class, it is necessary to learn the Basics.
YES To do well in this class, students must learn the Basics.

8. Please use the semicolon to separate main clauses in compound sentences.

[Misused ;] Avoid misused semicolons. (34)

- NO These are the three most common Basics errors; comma splices, fragments, and pronoun/antecedent disagreement.
YES These are the three most common Basics errors: comma splices, fragments, and pronoun/antecedent disagreement.
YES Semicolons separate independent clauses; colons indicate a series.

9. Please use the apostrophe correctly: to indicate possession, to show omission of one or more letters in contractions, or to form the plural of (some) letters and symbols.

[Missing or Misused '] Avoid misused or missing apostrophes. (36)

- NO The cat vomited it's Friskies.
YES The cat vomited its Friskies.

An apostrophe's use depends upon its function in a sentence: it can show possessiveness of a noun, and it can indicate omitted letters in a contraction (as when "cannot" becomes "can't").

10. Please use the comma correctly. (32)

[, boysfan] A. Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (*but, or, yet, so, for, and nor* [BOYSFAN]) to join independent clauses of a compound sentence.

- NO Students find comma usage frustrating at first but soon they master it.
YES Students find comma usage frustrating at first, but soon they master it.

[Serial ,] B. Use a comma between all items in a series.

Thirty years ago the serial comma was mandatory, fifteen years ago it was optional, but now it has become mandatory again, mostly for clarity's sake.

- NO Her schedule included Greek, Rhetoric, Yoga and Technical Writing.
YES Her schedule included Greek, Rhetoric, Yoga, and Technical Writing.

[Intro ,] C. Use a comma to set off introductory words, phrases, and clauses.

Admittedly, learning comma rules can be frustrating.

After using commas correctly for years, you will become experts.

When using commas, be sure to have a reason; when in doubt, leave them out.

[par ,] D. Use a pair of commas to offset parenthetical expressions and nonessential words, phrases, and clauses.

Overusing the comma, a common error, will earn one little respect as a writer.

Too many commas, like the proverbial chefs, spoil the essay.

Mr. Howard, my English professor, is fastidious about punctuation.



Please note that when I mark your essays, I will not correct your mistakes for you; instead, I will highlight the Basics error and assume an ephiphany will occur. A box or brackets around a sentence element indicates a Basics error. Something circled indicates a spelling error. Something with a wiggly line underneath it indicates *merde* (see list) or confusing usage or an awkward construction—the equivalent of my saying “Huh?” You don’t want to see boxes, brackets, circles, or wiggly lines on your papers. But, where they occur, learn from the mistake, please, and avoid the same errors in future work.

On a positive note, checks in the margin indicate “good point” or “well put” or “Yes”—the equivalent of my saying “Bravo!” Smiley Faces indicate amusement; Smiley Faces with tongues indicate extraordinary amusement, etc. Look for similar signs of encouragement in the margins as well as a brief summary of strengths and weaknesses at the end of your essay. And, of course, if ever you cannot decypher my shorthand or understand some comment I’ve made, please ask me to explain. I am happy to do so.

Finally, nearly seventy years ago, in “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell wrote six rules for writers; they’re still applicable today, and I leave you with them:

- (i) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are not used to seeing in print.
- (ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- (iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- (iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- (v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- (vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Merde

The following list includes not only blatant errors but also terms that are imprecise, colloquial, or informal; please avoid them in academic writing. The goal is to write clearly, concisely, concretely, and compellingly. Academic prose should fall somewhere between the informality of a newspaper article and the hyperformality of *The Declaration of Independence*. You don't want to sound pompous or pretentious, but neither do you want to sound illiterate. Looking for a classic on writing? See Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*.

alot

There's no such word; you mean "a lot"; but how much is that? As with all your writing, try to be precise. Use "a lot" for real estate, not rhetoric.

NO Alot of writers should consult a handbook while they edit.

YES Most beginning writers should consult a handbook while they edit.

definitely, great, quite, really, incredible, fantastic, totally, very. . . .

These words usually add nothing but filler; *either leave them out altogether or choose a more fitting word.*

NO The movie was definitely good. I really liked it alot.

YES *Religulous* is an irreverent, often funny movie, but I wouldn't recommend it for those who are easily offended.

I think, I believe, I feel, in my opinion, in my personal opinion, etc.

First off, please note: *I am not saying never use "I."* Obviously, if you are writing about something that happened to you, it would be silly to circumvent the issue by such phrases as "one" or "this writer," etc. So use "I" if you're writing about yourself in an example that furthers your point. "When I was a boy, I was bitten by a Chowchow, and I have hated the creatures ever since." However, in most cases, if you wrote it, your reader may *assume* you "think" it, "feel" it, or that it contains your "opinion," unless you have given credit where credit was due. Try to keep the focus on the issue, not on yourself (unless, of course, you *are* the focus, as in a personal narrative). Do not write "I think the thesis of this essay is. . . ."; write "The thesis of this essay is. . . ." Do not write "I believe we need covered parking at the Spring Creek Campus"; write "We need covered parking at the Spring Creek Campus." Do not write "In my opinion, *American Gods* is Neil Gaiman's best novel"; write "*American Gods* is Neil Gaiman's best novel." Be direct, forceful; believe in what you're writing or be quiet.

centers around

Have you ever seen a center that was *around* anything?

NO The plot of *Hostel* centers around American tourists being tortured for profit.

YES The plot of *Hostel* centers on American tourists being tortured for profit.

In our society today, In today's world, In our modern society today, etc.

This is a favorite of beginning writers, but it is as stale an opening as "It was a dark and stormy night." Unless writing a sociology paper, please avoid this construction.

NO In our society today, civility seems to have entirely disappeared, especially online.

YES Civility has died, especially online.

thing

Substitute a more concrete term. What is a ‘thing,’ anyway?

NO The thing that really annoys me is alot of people in today’s world are really rude.

YES Rudeness irks me.

you, your

In general, *do not address your reader unless you are giving directions*. When you use “you” I think you mean “me,” so don’t use “you” unless you mean me (and then only in a letter or email, for that matter, not in an academic essay). Yes, in common parlance “you” often refers to “anyone,” but try to avoid writing it in your college essays, please.

NO When visiting the grassy knoll, you remember that day in 1963 when three shots forced Dallas into history.

YES When visiting the grassy knoll, tourists may recall that day in 1963 when three shots forced Dallas into history.

NO After getting your tongue pierced, your speech may be slurred for awhile.

YES After getting her tongue pierced, Mavis’ speech was slurred for awhile.

cliches Avoid using cliches like the plague—unless it’s raining cats and dogs.

“to be” verbs

Generally, substitute stronger, more concrete verbs for “to be” verbs, especially in “there is,” “there are,” and “it is” constructions. As a bonus, avoiding “to be” verbs helps to eliminate passive voice.

NO The class was given ample time by the instructor to complete the assignment.

YES The instructor gave the class ample time to finish the assignment.

NO There are many advantages to postponing marriage until finishing college.

YES Postponing marriage until finishing college has its advantages.

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 Ill-trained writers often confuse the following terms. Please be aware of their meaning and use them correctly. For help with these and similarly confused words, check the “Glossary” in your handbook (pp. 608-621 in *Rules for Writers*) or use a dictionary.

**accept, except**

**affect, effect**

**cite, sight, site**

**compliment, complement**

**conscience, conscious**

**disinterested, uninterested**

**fewer, less**

**hanged, hung**

**imply, infer**

**its, it’s**

**lie, lay**

**lose, loose**

**principle, principal**

**rite, right, write**

**to, too, two**

**than, then**

**their, there, they’re**