

How To Write Correct Sentences

Master the essentials of the sentence as an aid to clear thinking and effective writing. Writing a good sentence is an art, and you can master that art by developing your awareness of what makes a sentence work. As you become more familiar with the relationships among sentence elements, you will strengthen your writing skills and will be better able to make your meaning clear to your reader (i.e., your grader!).

The most common sentence problems in student writing are: comma splice and fused (or run-on) sentence, sentence fragment (or incomplete sentence), agreement, and shifts. If you are unfamiliar with these terms and others such as subject, verb, object, complement, phrase, main clause, independent clause, subordinate clause, coordinating conjunction, number, person, etc., you are strongly encouraged to research their meanings and application in a standard English grammar book. Please see the list of recommended books in this Survival Manual or consider enrolling in a local or distance writing course.

Keep a few simple principles in mind:

COMMA SPLICE AND FUSED (OR RUN-ON) SENTENCE

Do not link two main (independent) clauses with only a comma (comma splice) or run two main clauses together without any punctuation (fused sentence).

Examples:

Comma Splice: The wind was cold, they decided not to walk.

Fused Sentence: The wind was cold they decided not to walk.

To correct comma splices and fused sentences: 1) Place a period after the first main (independent) clause and write the second main clause as a sentence; 2) use a semi-colon to separate main clauses; or 3) insert a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet) after the comma; or 4) make one clause subordinate to the other.

Revisions:

The wind was cold. They decided not to walk.

The wind was cold; they decided not to walk.

The wind was cold, so they decided not to walk.

The wind was so cold that they decided not to walk.

SENTENCE FRAGMENT

Avoid sentence fragments. The term fragment refers to a group of words beginning with a capital letter and ending with a period. Although written as if it were a sentence, a fragment is only a part of a sentence – such as a phrase or a subordinate clause.

Examples:

Larry always working in his yard on Saturdays.

Because he enjoys his flowers and shrubs.

Which help to screen his house from the street.

For example, a tall hedge with a border of petunias.

Eliminate fragments by making them into complete sentences or by connecting them to existing sentences. One way to eliminate many sentence fragments is to be sure that each word group has at least one subject and one predicate.

Corrections:

Larry always works in his yard on Saturdays.

He enjoys the flowers and shrubs.

OR: He enjoys the flowers and shrubs that help to screen his house from the street – for example, a tall hedge with a border of petunias.

AGREEMENT

Make a verb agree in number with its subject; make a pronoun agree in number with its antecedent.

A singular subject takes a singular verb, and a plural subject takes a plural verb.

Singular: The **car** in the lot **looks** shabby. [*car looks*]

Plural: The **cars** in the lot **look** shabby. [*cars look*]

When a pronoun has an antecedent (an antecedent is the noun to which the pronoun refers), the noun and pronoun should agree in number.

Singular: A **dolphin** has **its** own language. [*dolphin – its*]

Plural: **Dolphins** have **their** own language. [*dolphins – their*]

SHIFTS

Avoid needless shifts in person and number.

Shift: If a **person** is going to improve, **you** should work harder. [shift from third person to second person]

Better: If **you** are going to improve, **you** should work harder. [second person]

OR If **people** are going to improve, **they** should work harder. [third person]

OR If **we** are going to improve, **we** should work harder. [first person]

GENDER REFERENCES

Avoid awkward “his/her” and “he/she” gender constructions.

Awkward: The client is usually the best judge of his or her counseling.

Better: The client is usually the best judge of the value of counseling. [Omit gender referents.]

OR Clients are usually the best judges of the value of the counseling they receive. [Change to plural]

OR The best judge of the value of counseling is usually the client. [Rephrase the sentence.]