

Gremlins of Grammar

Grammatical errors in your memos, announcements, reports and letters detract from your professional image; additionally, errors reduce understanding and readability. Learn how to identify and correct the five most frequent mistakes in business writing today:

- **Problem pronouns:** WHO or WHOM? I or ME? THEY or THEM?
- **Punctuation dilemmas:** COMMA, SEMICOLON or just plain PERIOD?
- **Verb abuse:** Neither John nor Sam (ARE/IS) going with me.
- **Clause confusion:** WHICH, THAT or WHO?
- **Pesky Prepositions:** too much of *OF*, *AT* and *TO*

A QUICK REVIEW

Parts of Speech:

- **NOUN** – names something: a person, place, object or idea. *Football, cafeteria, book* and *freedom* are nouns.
- **PRONOUN** – a pronoun stands in for or replaces a noun: *it, who, they, his* and *which*.
- **VERB** – describes an action or a state of being: *run, join, affect, is* and *are*.
- **ADJECTIVE** – modifies the meaning of a noun or pronoun: *blue, happy, dazzling*.
- **ADVERB** – modifies the meaning of a verb, an adjective or another adverb: *swiftly, very, methodically*.
- **PREPOSITION** – Expresses the relationship of a noun or pronoun to other words in the sentence: *with, under, beside, during*.
- **CONJUNCTION** – joins together words or phrases: *and, but, yet, although, because, since, whether*.
- **INTERJECTION** – expresses excitement or emotion independently of other words in a sentence. May stand alone with an exclamation mark: *Hallelujah! Hey! Yikes! Whoa!*
- **SENTENCE** – (write a definition of a sentence.)

PUNCTUATION DILEMMAS

COMMA: The comma is the most frequently used and abused aid to reading. Used correctly, it helps the reader relate one part of a sentence to another and follow the writer's train of thought.

ACCEPTABLE USES [see appendix (i) for other uses]:

- Separate items in a series.
- Separate multiple adjectives before a noun.
- Signal a natural pause.
- Set off nonessential information.
- Precede any of the seven "connector" words: *and, but, for, or, nor, so, and yet*.
- Separate introductory clauses or phrases that begin with words like *after, although, as, because, if, since, when, while*.

ABUSES: Fix these errors! Circle or underline the mistakes.

Connecting two sentences with a comma.

Example: We had taken the wrong turn, we were heading south instead of west.

Mixing commas and semicolons in a series/list of things.

Example: To reduce the school's expenses, the principal asked her staff to consider implementing the following measures: if possible, limit paper use to one ream per classroom per week, turn off lights in the bathrooms, whenever leaving; turn down the thermostat in your room, and ask students to bring pencils from home.

Omitting either the first or second comma of a nonessential clause.

Example: Twenty teams of four or five students each, organized by grade level bowled two games in friendly competition to raise \$12,000 for new library books, winter camp scholarships and technology.

Separating the subject of a sentence from the main verb.

Example: Right behind the coach, came all of the players.

Separating an adjective from the word it modifies.

Example: Her flaming, red hair glistened in the sunlight.

Adding commas indiscriminately.

Example: Johnson said, that absent some grants, the agency receives, about 75 percent of its funding comes from donations.

The RULE: *A comma must add sense or meaning to the sentence. Use it when not using it makes the meaning difficult to understand*

SEMICOLON

ACCEPTABLE USES:

- **Combines two thoughts of equal rank that could be divided into two sentences.**

Example: *The bank teller determined the bill was counterfeit; there was no serial number on it.*

- **Punctuates major elements within a long, complex sentence that also contains commas or other punctuation.**

Example: *Organizers of the “dropout crisis” hearings heard four themes that rose up over and over: students need caring relationships with adults, in addition to their parents; schools need to use multiple approaches; schools must tackle the problem early; and, community collaboration is the key.*

- **Separates items in a series when the items contain commas or are long and complex.**

Example: *While researching his dissertation topic, he visited several colleges, schools and academic institutions; several factories, office buildings and banks; and a number of public buildings of a miscellaneous nature.*

The RULE: *A semicolon is similar to a period, but it signals to the reader that the next thought is related in some way to the first.*

COLON

USES [see Appendix (i) for other uses]:

The colon means “as follows.” It signals the reader that something else is coming. Its most frequent use is at the end of a sentence to introduce lists, tabulations, and long quotations of text. The colon can usually be replaced by a long dash (not a hyphen).

Examples: There were three criteria for the scholarship: overall grade point average, community service, and financial need.

He had only one hobby: eating.

PROBLEM PRONOUNS

Reminder: a pronoun is a word that takes the place of a noun.

The WHO/Whom Controversy

The problem: When to use WHO and when to choose WHOM.

Example: The parent who/whom I called knew about his son's absence.

The rules:

WHO will always do something to WHOM.

Use WHO and WHOM for references to human beings and animals with a name.

Use THAT and WHICH for inanimate things and animals without a name.

The solution:

- 1) Look only at the clause in which WHO or WHOM appears (who/whom I called).
- 2) Scramble the words in the clause so they form a statement – not a question. (I called _____)
- 3) Substitute either HE or HIM for WHO or WHOM. This tells you which to use. (He = who; him = whom. The final *m* helps you remember.)

That/Which Controversy

The problem: These pronouns are very frequently misused.

Example: The group of boys which set off the fire alarm will be punished. (incorrect)
The newspapers, that Mrs. Brown donated for art projects, were accidentally recycled.
The janitorial staff, which is usually very conscientious, could not explain what happened.

The rules:

- Use THAT in phrases needed to create the meaning of the sentence.
- Use WHICH when the thought is interesting but non-essential.
- Never use WHICH when referring to people; use WHO or THAT.
- Always use commas to set off a phrase/clause that begins with WHICH.

Examples:

The bagels that we intended to serve at the meeting were still in the freezer.

The strawberry cream cheese, which she brought yesterday, had disappeared.

The policeman who/that witnessed the accident failed to file a timely report.

The stray dog that caused the accident escaped unharmed

The PERSONAL Pronouns

The problem: Writing specialists say no grammatical error is more common than the confusion of *I, he, she, we* and *they* with *me, him, her, us* and *them*.

Examples of incorrect usage:

“...send it directly to he and me to save time.”

“ It’s time for Kristin and I to have a little talk...”

“They raised my brother and I to believe anything was attainable.”

Rules:

- When the pronoun is the subject of the sentence (when it is doing the action), use *I, you, he, she, we, or they*.
- When the pronoun is the object receiving the action, use *me, you, him, her, us* or *them*.
- When the pronoun follows a preposition (*in, on, to, by, for, from, with, between, etc.*), it will always be the object of the preposition. Therefore, you must use *me, you, him, her, us, them*.

AGREEMENT ISSUES – Keeping Harmony in the Sentence

The Secret of Your Success:

If your writing is to be logical and clear, the various parts of each sentence must agree: Verbs must agree in number with subjects; pronouns must agree in number with the nouns they replace.

Disharmony abounds – find the errors:

“In the past it was the parent’s responsibility to notify the district that they were leaving, which often didn’t happen. This student was then counted as a dropout regardless if they were in school somewhere else.” (Source: a leading Michigan education newsletter)

The Rules of Agreement:

1. If you use a singular subject, you have to use a singular verb. If you use a plural subject, you must use a plural verb.

Find the errors:

“The Department of Treasury has tried very hard over the past few years to make it very clear that there are no such thing as a tax-free cigarettes – not legally anyway,” a spokesman said. (Source: *The State Journal*, Lansing)

2. Pronouns must agree with the nouns they replace (e.g., the car/it; the bus driver/she; vendors/they; members of our family/we).

Find the errors:

“In this neck-and-neck race, the candidate that does the best job of championing these issues and making their policies personally relevant to 50+ voters may be able to tip the balance of the election in their favor...”

3. Verbs must also agree with an indefinite pronoun when it is the subject of a sentence.

Find the error:

“It’s regrettable that any of these board members have to be asked to defend themselves about anything – especially with a front-page article in the newspaper.”

“The problem is, none of those players are Tiger Woods.”

A note on five special pronouns:

4. Agreement with compound subjects: all subjects joined together by the word “and” are considered plural, with one exception.

Find the error:

Jack and he is going to the game.

Her longtime nurse and companion is coming to tea.

One and one are two.

5. In subjects joined by “or” or “nor,” the verb should agree with the subject’s individual parts.

Examples:

Either Tom or Henry has lost the book.

Either the O’Malley’s or the Smith’s have the best garden every year.

Either the two cats or the dog is going to have to go.

Neither the horse nor the trainer was ready to race.

THOSE PESKY PREPOSITIONS

What's Wrong Here?

1. "When I came with my daughter on her fourth-grade field trip, I knew it was a place *that I would want to be at.*"

2. "Controversial opinions *thrive off of* the freedom and integrity of the Constitution."

3. "Detroit mayor addresses media members *outside of* the City Council meeting room."

Reminder: A preposition is a joining word that links different parts of a sentence. It often tells the position of something (above, below, among, around, behind, beside, during, for, from, inside, into, off, on, over, under, up).

Example: Jack and Jill went UP the hill. ("Up" links the verb "went" to the noun "hill.")

RULE: Never use two when one will do!

Other Problem Prepositions:

- **Different from / different than** – standard American usage is *different from*.

Examples:

His style is different from hers.

My invitation looks different from theirs.

- **Where...at?** The preposition *at* should never be used with *where*.

Example:

Where are they now? (NOT Where are they *at*....)

- **Off of** –Using two prepositions is ungrammatical.

Example:

Get off your soapbox so we can have a meaningful discussion. (NOT *off of*)

- **Over with** – *With* is unnecessary if you're referring to something being finished.

Examples:

Is the meeting over? (Not Is the meeting *over with*?)

Let's get this over with! (Okay for emphasis.)

- **Type of a** – Never use *a* with the phrase *type of*.

Example: What type of job are you seeking?

What type of color scheme are you using for your wedding?

Conventional Uses of the Comma

- Following the salutation of an informal letter: *Dear Sarah,*
- Following the complimentary close of a letter: *Yours truly,*
- Following dates of the month from the year: *April 10, 1957*
- Separating parts of an address: *Ms. Eliza Brown, 138 Maple St., Buena Vista, CO 81211*
- Separating numbered or lettered divisions or subdivisions: *Book III, Chapter 9; or III, 9; or A, d*
- Separating names from distinguishing titles: *Frank Jones, Jr. or Morris Watts, Ph.D.*
- Separating thousands in large figures: *3,720,511*
- Separating a direct quotation from the indication of the speaker: *“I just spoke with Jenny,” she said excitedly.*
- Placed before and after introductory words and abbreviations such as *i.e.*, *e.g.*, and *for example*:
Some plays are known as closet dramas; i.e., they were written to be read rather than acted.

Abused, Confused & Often *Misused*

accept - to receive
except - to exclude, omit

advice - suggestion, counsel
advise - to give advice

adapt - to make suitable
adopt - to select, choose

affect - to influence
effect - result (n), to accomplish

aggravate - make a situation
 worse
irritate - to annoy

aid - to help, assist
aide - an assistant

all ready - properly prepared
already - happened previously

allot - distribute, assign a
 portion
a lot - a great deal (not *alot*)

alright - bad spelling of *all right*

anxious - uneasy, nervous
eager - enthusiastic

alumnus - a male graduate
alumna - a female graduate
alumni - all graduates
alumnae - female graduates

among - for more than two
between - two persons, things

appraise - to set value
apprise - to inform

amount - quantity, bulk
number - individual units

as - As I said (NOT *like*)
like - *comparison*: The baby
 smiled like an angel.

ascent - a climb
assent - agreement

assure - speak with confidence
ensure - guarantee, make certain
insure - protect against loss

beside - by the side of
besides - in addition

bimonthly - every two months
semimonthly - twice a month

capital - wealth, net worth,
 seat of Government
Capitol - government buildings

chairman – ref. Robert's Rules
chairperson – preferred usage (p.c.)

cite - make a reference to, source
site - location, space of ground

complement - fill up, complete
compliment - praise

consensus - agreement

council - a group of individuals
counsel - advice, or a lawyer

desert - a dry, sandy place
dessert - end of meal treat

different from - never *different than*
differ from - difference between one
 thing or person and another.

discreet - circumspect
discrete - separate, individual

dual - refers to two things (controls)
duel - a formal contest

e.g. - for example (*exempli gratia*)
i.e. - that is, clarifies (*id est*)

explicit - expressed directly
implicit - implied, not expressed

farther - refers to physical distance
further - degree or extent

fewer - a smaller number (fewer dollars)
less - a smaller amount (less funding)

flair - a special talent
flare - sudden bright light, eruption

former - first named of two persons or things
latter - last named of two persons or things

fortuitous - accidental
fortunate - favorable

hanged - execution by hanging
hung - laundry, paintings

healthful - health-giving (diet)
healthy - in a state of good health

imply - to hint without saying
infer - to deduce from what's been said

irregardless - NO! regardless is correct

its, it's - *It's* too late to save *its* life.
It is too late to save it.

lay - to set down or place (lay, laid)

lie - to recline, repose (lie, lay, lain)

loose - not tight
lose - misplace, be defeated
mean - the average
median - midpoint, middle value

morale - spirit or mood
moral - conduct or ethical behavior

nauseous - causes nausea (a bad odor)
nauseated - feel sick to one's stomach

precede - to go ahead of
proceed - to move forward

prostate - male reproductive gland
prostrate - prone, helpless, submissive

raise - lift up, elevate (an object)
rise - to get up, to ascend (the sun, a person)

rare - highly valued, hard to find
scarce - ordinary things in short supply

sit/set - pupils sit in class
kids set the table

stationary - motionless, still
stationery - paper, letterhead

there - (adv) There it is.
they're - (contraction) They are...
their - (possessive) It's their backpack.

who's - *Who is* going to help?
whose - *Whose* bike was stolen?

unique - the only one of its kind
(Cannot be *most* unique)

Exceptions to the Rule

RULE: We all learned it: “i” before “e” except after “c.”

EXAMPLE: sieve, believe, relief

EXCEPTION: Receive, deceive, neighbor, weigh

And ALL the Other Exceptions (not after C)

beige,
being,
deity,
deify
deism,
deign,
feign,
feint
feisty
geisha
heifer
heighten

heinous
heir
heiress
heirloom
heist
leisure
neigh
neighbor
neither
peignoir/rein
reindeer
seine

seismic
seize
seizure
sleight-of-hand
stein
their
veil
vein
weigh
weight
weir
weird

Internet Resources for Grammar Help

Guide to Grammar and Writing

<http://ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/index.htm>

(includes interactive quizzes)

Grammar Bytes! Interactive Grammar Review

www.chompchomp.com/menu.htm

(interactive exercises on commas and irregular verbs)

FunBrain.com

www.funbrain.com/spell/index.html

(for children and parents, spelling quizzes)

A Spelling Test

www.sentex.net/~mmcadams/spelling.html

(50 difficult words test)

Bartleby.com

www.bartleby.com

(extremely helpful site for searching a dictionary, encyclopedia & thesaurus)

Merriam-Webster OnLine

www.m.w.com/home.htm

(includes interactive word games)

Easy-to-Use Grammar Books

100 words almost everyone confuses & misuses

Ed., American Heritage Dictionaries (Houghton Mifflin) 2004

Barron's Pocket Guide to Correct Grammar, Fourth Edition

(Barron's Educational Series, Inc.) 2004

Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation

Lynne Truss (Gotham Books, NY) 2004

The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual, 33rd Edition

(The Associated Press, NY) 1998

The Gremlins of Grammar

Toni Boyle and K.D. Sullivan (McGraw-Hill, NY) 2006

The Only Grammar Book You'll Ever Need

Susan Thurman (Adams Media Corp., MA) 2003

When Bad Grammar Happens to Good People: How to Avoid Common Errors in English

Ann Batko (The Career Press, NJ) 2004