Most Commonly Occurring Errors
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Would grammar seem more manageable to you if we told you that writers tend to make the same twenty mistakes over and over again? In fact, a study of error by Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors shows that **twenty different mistakes comprise 91.5 percent of all errors in student texts.** If you can control these twenty errors, you will go a long way in creating prose that is correct and clear. Below is an overview of these errors, listed according to the frequency with which they occur. Look for them in your own prose. [Doverspike added and updated the bracketed information as a supplement to Gocsik's (2004) list, and the yellow highlighted sections refer to corresponding rules in the APA (2010, 2022) *Publication Manual*.

❏ *1. Missing comma after introductory phrases.* [See punctuation section in APA (2010, p. 88) Section 4.03 or in APA (2020, p. 155) Section 6.3.]
11.5% of total errors, ranked # 2 based on errors marked by teachers.

For example: After the devastation of the siege of Leningrad the Soviets were left with the task of rebuilding their population as well as their city. (A comma should be placed after "Leningrad.")

❏ *2. Vague pronoun reference.* [See grammar and usage section in APA (2010, p. 79) Section 3.20 or in APA (2020, p. 120) Section 4.6.]
9.8% of total errors, ranked # 4 based on errors marked by teachers.

For example: The boy and his father knew that he was in trouble. (Who is in trouble? The boy? His Father? Some other person?)

❏ 3. Missing comma in compound sentence [i.e., between the two parts of a compound predicate]. [See punctuation section in APA (2010, p. 89) Section 4.03 or in APA (2020, p. 156) Section 6.3.]
8.6% of total errors, ranked # 7 based on errors marked by teachers.

For example: Wordsworth spent a good deal of time in the Lake District with his sister Dorothy and the two of them were rarely apart. (Comma should be placed before the "and.")

❏ *4. Wrong word.* [See writing style section in APA (2010 p. 68) Section 3.09 or in APA (2020, pp. 113–114) Section 4.4.]
7.8% of total errors, ranked #1 based on errors marked by teachers.

This speaks for itself.

❏ *5. No comma in nonrestrictive relative clauses.* [See punctuation section in APA (2010, p. 88) Section 4.03 or in APA (2020, p. 155) Section 6.3.]
6.5% of total errors, ranked #10 based on errors marked by teachers.

Here you need to distinguish between a *restrictive* relative clause and a *nonrestrictive* relative clause. Consider the sentence, "My brother in the red shirt likes ice cream." If you have TWO brothers, then the information about the shirt is restrictive, in that it is necessary to defining WHICH brother likes ice cream. Restrictive clauses, because they are essential to identifying the noun, use no commas. However, if you have ONE brother, then the information about the shirt is not necessary to identifying your brother. It is NON-RESTRICTIVE and, therefore, requires commas: "My brother, in the red shirt, likes ice cream."

❑ *6. Wrong/missing inflected ends.* [See grammar and usage section in APA (2010, pp. 78–79) Sections 3.19 and 3.20, in APA (2020, pp. 119–120) Section 4.15, or in APA (2020, p. 122) Section 4.20. See spelling section in APA (2010) Section 4.12 or in APA (2020, pp. 161-162) Section 6.11.]
5.9% of total errors, ranked #5 based on errors marked by teachers.

"Inflected ends" refers to a category of grammatical errors that you might know individually by other names - subject-verb agreement, who/whom confusion, and so on. The term "inflected endings" refers to something you already understand: adding a letter or syllable to the end of a word changes its grammatical function in the sentence. For example, adding "ed" to a verb shifts that verb from present to past tense. Adding an "s" to a noun makes that noun plural. A common mistake involving wrong or missing inflected ends is in the usage of **who/whom.** "Who" is a pronoun with a subjective case; "whom" is a pronoun with an objective case. We say "*Who* is the speaker of the day?" because "who" in this case refers to the **subject** of the sentence. But we say, "To *whom* am I speaking?" because, here, the pronoun is an **object** of the preposition "to."

❑ *7. Wrong/missing preposition.* [See Prepositions, below]
5.5% of total errors, ranked #8 based on errors marked by teachers.

Occasionally prepositions will throw you. Consider, for example which is better: "different from," or "different than?" Though both are used widely, "different from" is considered grammatically correct. The same debate surrounds the words "toward" and "towards." Though both are used, "toward" is preferred in writing. When in doubt, check a handbook.

> Prepositions are words or short phrases that identify the spatial (in space), directional (the direction in which something is moving), or temporal (in time) relationship of one or more people or things to other people or things. Prepositions communicate abstract relationships as well as concrete ones.
>
> **Source: Tony Cimasko**, The OWL at Purdue. Retrieved from
> http://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/3/5/

❑ *8. Comma splice.* [See punctuation section in APA (2010, pp. 88–90) Section 4.03 or in APA (2020, pp. 155–156) Section 6.3.]
5.5% of total errors, ranked #6 based on errors marked by teachers.

A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses are joined only with a comma. For example: "Picasso was profoundly affected by the war in Spain, it led to the painting of great masterpieces like *Guernica.*" A comma splice also occurs when a comma is used to divide a subject from its verb. For example: "The young Picasso felt stifled in art school in Spain, and wanted to leave." (The subject "Picasso" is separated from one of its verbs "wanted." There should be no comma in this sentence, unless you are playing with grammatical correctness for the sake of emphasis—a dangerous sport for unconfident or inexperienced writers.)

❒ *9. Possessive apostrophe error.* [See spelling section in APA (2010, p. 96) Section 4.12, in APA (2020, p. 116) Section 4.8, in APA (2020, p. 336) Section 10.8 or in APA (2020), p. 338) Section 10.9.]
5.1% of total errors, ranked #3 based on errors marked by teachers.

Sometimes apostrophes are incorrectly left out; other times, they are incorrectly put in (her's, their's, etc.)

❒ *10. Tense shift.* [See grammar and usage section in APA (2010, p. 78) Section 3.18, in APA (2020, p. 117–118) Section 4.12, in APA (2020, p. 120) Section 4.16 or in APA (2020, p. 12) Section 4.17.]
5.1% of total errors, ranked #12 based on errors marked by teachers.

Be careful to stay in a consistent tense. Too often students move from past to present tense without good reason. The reader will find this annoying.

❒ *11. Unnecessary shift in person.* [APA (2010, 2020) style requires consistency, which aids clarity. See APA (2010, p. 79–80, Section 3.20, in APA (2020, p. 120) Section 4.16 or in APA (2020, p. 120) Section 4.17.]
4.7% of total errors, ranked #14 based on errors marked by teachers.

Don't shift from "I" to "we" or from "one" to "you" unless you have a rationale for doing so.

❒ *12. Sentence fragment.* [See How to Spot a Fragment, which is in text box below.]
4.2% of total errors, ranked #9 based on errors marked by teachers.

Silly things, to be avoided. Unless, like here, you are using them to achieve a certain effect. Remember: sentences traditionally have both subjects and verbs. Don't violate this convention carelessly.

How to Spot a Fragment

Put each phrase through a simple test:

- Does it have a verb?
- Does it have a subject?
- Can the phrase make sense standing alone (is it a dependent clause or phrase)?

Any phrase that answers "yes" to all three questions is a sentence. If any of the answers are "no," then it is a fragment.

Source: University of Richmond Writing Center. Retrieved 11-12-2012 from http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/fragment.html

❐ *13. Wrong tense or verb form.* [See grammar and usage section in APA (2010, p 78) Section 3.18 or in APA (2020, pp. 117–118) Section 4.12.]
3.3% of total errors, ranked #13 based on errors marked by teachers.

Though students generally understand how to build tenses, sometimes they use the wrong tense, saying, for example, "In the evenings, I like to *lay* on the couch and watch TV" "Lay" in this instance is the past tense of the verb, "to lie." The sentence should read: "In the evenings, I like to *lie* on the couch and watch TV." (Please note that "to lay" is a separate verb meaning "to place in a certain position.")

❐ *14. Subject-verb agreement.* [See grammar and usage section in APA (2010, pp. 78–79) Section 3.19 or in APA (2020, p. 119) Section 4.15.]
3.2% of total errors, ranked #11 based on errors marked by teachers.

This gets tricky when you are using collective nouns or pronouns and you think of them as plural nouns: "The committee wants [not want] a resolution to the problem." Mistakes like this also occur when your verb is far from your subject. For example, "The media, who *has* all the power in this nation and *abuses* it consistently, *uses* its influence for ill more often than good." (Note that media is an "it," not a "they." The verbs are chosen accordingly.)

❐ *15. Missing comma in a series.* [See punctuation section in APA (2010, p. 88) Section 4.03 or in APA (2020, p. 155) Section 6.3.]
2.7% of total errors, ranked #19 based on errors marked by teachers.

Whenever you list things, use a comma. You'll find a difference of opinion as to whether the next-to-last noun (the noun before the "and") requires a comma. ("Apples, oranges, pears, and bananas...") Our advice is to use the comma because sometimes your list will include pairs of things: "For Christmas she wanted books and tapes, peace and love, and for all the world to be happy." If you are in the habit of using a comma before the "and," you'll avoid confusion in sentences like this one.

❐ *16. Pronoun agreement error.* [See grammar and usage section in APA (2010, p. 79) Section 3.20, in APA (2020, p. 120) Section 4.16, or in APA (2020, pp. 120–121) Section 4.18. As of October 1, 2019, use of the singular "they" is part of APA (2020) style because it "is inclusive of all people and helps writers avoid making assumptions about gender" (APA, 2020, p. 121).]
2.6% of total errors, ranked #15 based on errors marked by teachers.

Many students have a problem with pronoun agreement. They will write a sentence like "Everyone is entitled to their opinion." The problem is, "everyone" is a singular pronoun. You will have to use "his" or "her."

❐ *17. Unnecessary commas with restrictive clauses.* [See punctuation section in APA (2010, p. 89) Section 4.03 and in APA (2020, p. 155) Section 6.3).]
2.4% of total errors, ranked #17 based on errors marked by teachers.

See the explanation for number five, above.

❐ *18. Run-on, fused sentence.* [See economy of expression section in APA (2010, p. 67) Section 3.08, in APA (2020, pp. 113–114) Section 4.4, or in APA (2020, pp. 114–115) Section 4.5.]
2.4% of total errors, ranked #16 based on errors marked by teachers.

Run-on sentences are sentences that run on forever, they are sentences that ought to have been two or even three sentences but the writer didn't stop to sort them out, leaving the reader feeling exhausted by the sentence's end which is too long in coming. (Get the picture?)

Fused sentences occur when two independent clauses are put together without a comma, semi-colon, or conjunction. For example: "Researchers investigated several possible vaccines for the virus then they settled on one." [See punctuation section in APA (2010) Section 4 or APA (2020) Section 4.]

❐ *19. Dangling, misplaced modifier.* [See grammar and usage section in APA (2010, p. 81–82) Section 3.21 or in APA (pp. 123–124) Section 4.23.]
2.0% of total errors, ranked #20 based on errors marked by teachers.

Modifiers are any adjectives, adverbs, phrases, or clauses that a writer uses to elaborate on something. Modifiers, when used wisely, enhance your writing. But if they are not well-considered - or if they are put in the wrong places in your sentences - the results can be less than eloquent. Consider, for example, this sentence: "The professor wrote a paper on sexual harassment in his office." Is the sexual harassment going on in the professor's office? Or is his office the place where the professor is writing? One hopes that the latter is true. If it is, then the original sentence contains a **misplaced modifier** and should be re-written accordingly: "In his office, the professor wrote a paper on sexual harassment." Always put your modifiers next to the nouns they modify.

Dangling modifiers are a different kind of problem. They intend to modify something that isn't in the sentence. Consider this: "As a young girl, my father baked bread and gardened." The writer means to say, "When I was a young girl, my father baked bread and gardened." The modifying phrase "as a young girl" refers to some noun not in the sentence. It is, therefore, a dangling modifier. Other dangling modifiers are more difficult to spot, however. Consider this sentence: "Walking through the woods, my heart ached." Is it your heart that is walking through the woods? It is more accurate (and more grammatical) to say, "Walking through the woods, I felt an ache in my heart." Here you avoid the dangling modifier.

❐ *20. Its/it's error.* [The APA (2010) *Publication Manual* does not give directions on contractions. Contractions are a less formal way of stating something. For example, the expression "it is" is more formal than "it's." Similarly, "do not" is more formal than "don't." Avoid using contractions in scientific writing. In contrast, the APA (2020, p. 116) Section 4.8 states: "Avoid using contractions and colloquialisms, which detract from a professional tone in scholarly writing."]
1.0% of total errors, ranked #18 based on errors marked by teachers.

"Its" is a possessive pronoun. "It's" is a contraction for "it is."

Note: The above percentages and rankings are based on Table 2: Connors and Lunsford's (1988) List of Most Frequent Formal Errors. Retrieved 11-16-2012 from
http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/resources/0312452802/lunsford_article_mistakes.pdf

A National Comparative Study

In 1986, Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford sent letters to teachers, asking them to participate in a national study of student writing by submitting a set of marked student papers from a first-year composition course. The call for papers brought in well over 21,000 papers from 300 teachers around the country, and in fairly short order Andrea and Bob drew a random sample of 3,000 student papers stratified to be representative in terms of region of the country, size of institution, and type of institution. While they later analyzed patterns of teacher response to the essays as well as the particular spelling patterns that emerged (in that study, spelling was the most frequent student mistake by some 300 percent), they turned first to an analysis of which formal errors (other than spelling) were most common in this sample of student writing.

Andrea A. Lunsford and Karen J. Lunsford updated this work in 2006, publishing their findings in 2008. Between 1986 and 2006, "wrong word" jumped to #1, and misspelling fell from #1 to #5—likely because of word processing—today we are more likely to use a wrong word, but spell it correctly, since word processors cannot accurately determine proper usage. Seven of the 20 errors always involve punctuation—and many others can. Beware the comma!

 1. Wrong word
 2. Missing comma after an introductory element
 3. Incomplete or missing documentation
 4. Vague pronoun reference
 5. Spelling error (including homonyms)
 6. Mechanical error with a quotation
 7. Unnecessary comma
 8. Unnecessary or missing capitalization
 9. Missing word
10. Faulty sentence structure
11. Missing comma with a nonrestrictive element
12. Unnecessary shift in verb tense
13. Missing comma in a compound sentence
14. Unnecessary or missing apostrophe (including its/it's)
15. Fused (run-on) sentence
16. Comma splice
17. Lack of pronoun-antecedent agreement
18. Poorly integrated quotation
19. Unnecessary or missing hyphen
20. Sentence fragment

References

Connors, R. J., & Lunsford, A. A. (1988). Frequency of formal errors in current college writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle do research. *College Composition and Communication, 39*(4), 395–409.

Lunsford, A. A., & Lunsford, K. J. (2008). Mistakes are a fact of life: A national comparative study. *College Composition and Communication, 59*(4), 781-806. https://undergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/hume-center/resources/student-resources/grammar-resources-writers/top-twenty-errors-undergraduate-writing

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Note: The link to Karen Gocsik's (2004) list is no longer active, and the link directs to the Dartmouth Writing Program.

Note: Doverspike added and updated the bracketed information as a supplement to Gocsik's (2004) list, and the yellow highlighted sections refer to corresponding rules in the APA (2010, 2022) *Publication Manual*. In errors in the yellow highlighted material would be the fault of Doverspike and not Gocsik.