

Crash Course on Grammar, Common Usage and APA style

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I. Punctuation: Comma Use

- College students generally do a good job with basic punctuation, with one notable exception— comma use.
- Most common errors involve how to use commas to set off clauses (dependent/independent, restrictive/non-restrictive)

- **A) Use a comma in between 2 independent clauses (clauses that could stand alone as independent sentences) that are joined together via a common conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, yet so). E.g.,**
 - *I went to the baseball game, and I ate a lot of junk food in the process.*
- **Do NOT use a comma if compounding and taking advantage of a common subject, verb, object, etc. E.g.,**
 - *I went to the baseball game and ate a lot of junk food.*
- **More examples:**
 - *Sarah studied for the test, and she did well.*
 - *Sarah studied and did well on the test.*

- *The island was peaceful and scenic.*
- *The island was peaceful, and the island was scenic.*
- **In general, compounding across parts of speech is preferred to maintaining independent clauses, unless there is a stylistic motivation.**

- **B) Use a comma to enclose or set-off a non-restrictive adjective clause (subordinate clause with a sub-verb combo that cannot stand alone as a sentence and that modifies a noun, but is unnecessary in indentifying that noun). E.g.,**
 - *Michael Collins, who is a noted Irish hero of the independence movement, has been the subject of many movies.*
- In the sentence above, given that Michael Collins is a proper noun that fully identifies a single person, the clause that follows is informative but not necessary. Compared to...

- *The score that I received on the math test was good.*
- The adjective clause “that I received on the math test” is necessary in identifying which score I mean, and therefore is restrictive and therefore does **not** need commas.
- More examples:
 - *The White House, which is in our nation’s capitol, has a neo-classical design.*
 - *The white house that is on the corner of Main and Farmer has a neo-classical design.*

II. Active vs. Passive Voice

- **Active voice means that the doer of the action is the subject of the sentence. E.g.,**

Susan ran the marathon.

I kicked the ball.

The traffic stopped his progress.

- **In each sentence above, the subjects (Susan, I, traffic) are the ones engaged in the action of the main verbs (ran, kicked, stopped).**

- **On the other hand, Passive voice typically hides the intended subject within a preposition. E.g.,**

The marathon was run by Susan.

The ball was kicked by me.

His progress was stopped by the traffic.

- Grammatically both sets of sentences are correct and meaningfully the sentences are identical. ***Stylistically, active voice sentences are preferred as they are more direct and less “clunky”.*** It always takes more words to construct a passive voice sentence than an active voice one.
- **Active voice is especially important in scientific writing, where economy of phrase is valued in advancing clarity.**

III. Parallel Structure

- **Parallel structure refers to the use of similar grammatical units when including lists of phrases in a sentence.** For example, if a sentence contains 3 phrases in sequence (gerunds), they should all be in the same form or tense.

I enjoy sailing, running and reading during my summer vacations.

- **Here's the same sentence but in non-parallel structure:**

I enjoy sailing, running, and I like to swim during my summer vacations.

IV. Verb Tense

- Determining correct verb use by tense and number agreement is among the most complicated issues in English grammar. There are rules, exceptions to rules, and ambiguous markers of time that can complicate things.
- Basic agreement in number and use of the simple past, present, and future tenses are the most fundamental issues, but not the one's that create the biggest problems.
- The perfect tenses tend to be the one's most commonly misused.

- **Present Perfect** → Something that started in the past, but is also true at the present moment. E.g., *Gilbert **has lost** a lot of money gambling.*
- **Past Perfect** → Same sentence, but now in the **Past Perfect** tense: *Gilbert **had lost** a lot of money gambling.* The implication with this construction is that while Gilbert did lose some money in the past, it is no longer true or the case that he continues to lose money.
- **Future Perfect** → And finally let's look at the future perfect construction of a similar sentence: *Gilbert **will have lost** a lot of money gambling by the end of the week.* Here the implication is that he may or may not be losing money at the present moment, but it *will happen* by the end of the week.

- **2 additional verb tense considerations in scientific/expository writing:**
 - 1) Students often mix tenses incorrectly in scientific writing. In general, relating the results of studies or research already completed should be done in the simple past tense.
 - 2) Students also often choose the incorrect narrative voice, which in turn, affects verb use. In general, 3rd person (objective) voice should be used and NOT 1st person (I, me, we, us) or 2nd person (you/ implied you).

V. Incomplete Sentences/Sentence Fragments

- Presence of sentence fragments/ incomplete sentences is often a symptom of careless writing, lack of proof-reading.
 - Fairly easy to determine whether or not this is the case.
- Sentence fragments are almost always the result of a missing noun subject or a missing verb (clearly attached to the subject) in the predicate.
- Students often “fool” themselves into thinking they have a complete sentence via an implied or “understood” subject. This happens quite frequently in one particular case:

- **Opening Prepositional Phrase as a Subject**

- E.g.,

- *According to the study examined the effects of tobacco smoke exposure*
- *According to the chapter mentions all kinds of different mood disorders.*
- *In the article by Smith (2007) related the effects of alcohol on prenatal development.*

- In the sentences above, the opening prepositional phrase is incorrectly used as a subject of the sentence. It is easy to see what the intended subject is, however, a preposition or the object of a preposition cannot act as a subject.

- *The study examined the effects of tobacco smoke exposure.*
- *The chapter mentions all kinds of different mood disorders.*
- *Smith (2007) related the effects of alcohol on prenatal development.*

VI. Article Use

- Among the most common areas of difficulty for ESL students. The rules and presence of articles in Korean and Mandarin Chinese, for example, are completely different.
- The following are the basic rules (a more complete guide is available upon request)
- **A/An**= Indefinite modifiers of a noun. (“a” precedes a noun that begins with a consonant or consonant sound, “an” with vowels or vowel sounds).
 - E.g. “an honest broker”
- **Note:** If noun is preceded by an adjective, then match a/an to the adjective sound (e.g. a broken egg, not an broken egg)
- **Some**= Plural version for indefinite nouns

- **The=** Is a definite article and precedes singular and plural nouns when the noun is particular, specific, or unique.
- **Note:** ‘The’ is not used with non-countable nouns referring to something in a general sense, e.g., *Tea is a popular drink all over the world.*

VII. Common Usage Errors

- These are just some of the typical examples, many textbooks provide much more detailed lists
- **Who vs. Whom**
 - The basic rule is that one should use “Who” as a subject and “Whom” as an object. This simple rule can eliminate most of the errors of usage.
 - *Who will be invited?* (subject of sentence)
 - *To whom will you send the invitation?* (object of preposition)

- **Between vs. Among**

- “Between” can only be used when referring to or comparing two things, whereas “among” should be used with or more things.

- **Further vs. Farther**

- Farther is used to refer to physically measurable differences, e.g.,
 - *The gas station is farther down this road*
 - Whereas further is more metaphorical or figurative in use, referring to “more” of something, but not in a way that makes it clear how “more” is being measured, e.g.,
 - *If you work on this further, the results will improve.*

- **I vs. Me**

- **“I” is a pronoun** to be used as a subject in a sentence. “I” therefore should be tied to a verb that describes the action “I” is engaged in or a linking verb that describes a state or condition “I” is in. Examples:

- *I kicked the ball.*
- *I got a good score on my exam.*
- *I am a CSUF student.*
- *I was tired of studying for finals.*

- **When to use “Me”**

- On the other hand, “ME” can only act as an object in a sentence, typically representing the person receiving the action of a verb, or as an object of a preposition. Examples:

- *The professor told me to go next.*
- *She handed me the test.*
- *I was happy she decided to talk to me.*

- **The only other confusion that sometimes arises occurs with compound subjects or objects, in other words when "I" or "ME" is linked to another pronoun, subject, or object using "and" or "or" Examples:**
- *Michael and I studied together.* CORRECT "Michael" and "I" are the compound subjects of the sentence
- *Michael and me studied together.* INCORRECT "Me" cannot be used as a subject in a sentence.
- *She told Michael and me to study together.* CORRECT "Michael" and "Me" are the one's being told something, i.e., receiving the action of the verb "told".
- *She told Michael and I to study together.* INCORRECT Only "Me" can be used as an object, not "I".

- One helpful hint in determining proper use in compound cases is to eliminate the compound and replace the subjects or objects with just I or ME and see which "sounds" right. The correct answer is usually more obvious once you do that. So taking the previous sentences and applying this hint:
- "I studied" vs. "Me studied" Which sounds better?
- If "I" sounds better (it should!!) then stick with it even when you add another subject like "Michael"
- "She told I to study" vs. "She told ME to study." Which sounds better?
- If ME sounds better, then that's what you should stick with even after you add "Michael" as another object.
- The plural forms of I and Me follow the same rules. The plural form of I is "WE" and the plural form of ME is "US"

- **Effect vs. Affect**
- This distinction becomes complicated quickly. Most people learn that “effect” should be used as a noun and “affect” as a verb. This heuristic serves most people fairly well.
- Unfortunately, it is not complete. Affect can be a noun defined as an emotional state (*His affect seemed unusually flat for someone who just won the lottery*) and “effect” can be used as a verb, e.g., “*I want to effect a change in the political discourse of the country.*”)
- In the sciences, typically “effect” is used to mean the outcomes of a variable or process, and in that usage should be a noun.
 - E.g., *The effects of the medication affected the participants’ levels of pain.*