

Common Writing Problems

Run-on Sentence A run-on sentence has too many complete thoughts in one sentence.

Solution: Divide the sentence into two.

My brother works hard, however he doesn't make a lot of money

My brother works hard. However, he doesn't make a lot of money.

- If the thoughts are closely connected and their structure is similar, you can use a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction to maintain one sentence.

(Coordinating conjunctions include: for and nor but or yet so Use FANBOYS to remember)

The man bought a new car his wife didn't know about it.

The man bought a new car, but his wife didn't know about it.

Fragment A fragment is a sentence that is missing a noun, a verb, or an independent clause.

Solution: Add what is missing.

Dropped in late. (missing a noun)

My friend dropped in late

The boy behind me. (missing a verb)

The boy behind me sneezed.

When she reached the finish line. (leaves a question – what happened?)

When she reached the finish line, she won.

Tense Disagreement Tense disagreement happens when a sentence begins with a verb in one tense (past or present-future) and a second verb changes to another tense. In general, it is best to stay in the same tense within a sentence and within a paragraph unless there is a good reason to change. For example, a conscious shift of time.

Solution: When you begin in one tense, stay in that tense.

The article was about people who are tall.

The article was about people who were tall.

Today I am happy, but three months ago I was very sad.

(This works because the tense shift is necessary and the timeframe is obvious.)

Subject-Verb Disagreement Subject-verb disagreement occurs when a singular subject is used with a plural form of a verb or visa versa.

Solution: Singular subjects go with singular verbs, and plural subjects go with plural verbs. Look for the main verb and who (or what) is doing the action. Then decide if the doer is singular or plural and match the verb to it.

Bob, wearing a hat and red socks, were sitting in the easy chair.

Bob, wearing a hat and red socks, was sitting in the easy chair.

Tom, along with Dick and Harry, is going to the movie.

Neither Tom nor Harry is able to pay for it.

A hammer is one of the tools that are most useful.

Joe looked at the rakes that were on sale.

This saw is the only one of all the tools that is on sale.

Collective nouns like *family, committee, jury, crowd,* and *group* are considered singular.

My family is the best in the world.

Numbers that represent a single unit are singular.

A million dollars is a lot of money to spend in one day.

Twenty-five percent is a big lead in the race.

Five years is a long time to study English.

Pronoun Disagreement Pronoun disagreement happens when a singular pronoun is used with a plural antecedent (the noun the pronoun is referring to) or visa versa.

Solution: Use a singular pronoun with a singular antecedent and a plural pronoun with a plural antecedent.

Tim and John are eating his tortilla chips.

Tim and John are eating their tortilla chips.

Neither Tim nor John is eating his tortilla chips.

Each of the boys is eating his tortilla chips.

Everyone should eat his vegetables.

NOT *Everyone should eat their vegetables.*

Could say *All students should eat their vegetables.*

Be sure nouns connected to singular pronouns are singular and visa versa.

All of the men wore dresses.

NOT *All of the men wore a dress.* (This implies all the men were inside the same dress.)

Be sure it is obvious which noun your pronoun refers to.

Jane and Sue fell into the deep hole, and she broke her leg. (Whose leg was broken?)

Misplaced Modifiers Misplaced modifiers occur when the noun being modified isn't the intended noun.

Solution: Include a subject and put modifying phrases next to their subjects.

Running at top speed, my wig flew off. (This implies my wig was running.)

I was running at top speed when my wig flew off.

While eating my pizza, the phone rang. (This implies the phone was eating pizza.)

While I was eating my pizza, the phone rang.

Unparallel Construction Unparallel construction happens when parts of sentences that are connected by idea are not expressed in similar form.

Solution: Keep parts of sentences in a similar form – all nouns, all verbs, or all clauses.

Pay attention to the debt, the assets, and whether the company has prospects for growth.

(noun) (noun) (clause)

Pay attention to the debt, the assets, and the prospects for growth. (Leaving off to is OK)

(noun) (noun) (noun)

George wanted to make money, buy a house, and he wanted early retirement.

(verb) (verb) (clause)

George wanted to make money, buy a house, and retire early.

(verb) (verb) (verb)

One way to test for parallelism is to read the sentence with each part separately.

George wanted to make money. George wanted to buy a house.

But George wanted to he wanted early retirement doesn't work.