

Common grammar errors

1. Comma splice error

A comma splice error occurs when two complete sentences are joined together by a comma. For example:

✗ *The benefits of this kind of therapy are substantial, there are relatively few adverse side effects.*

Comma splice errors are quite common, particularly for native speakers of English. They often result from the desire to avoid writing short sentences. A comma splice error can be fixed in different ways, depending on the length of the sentences.

- If the two sentences are short, it is best to join them with a conjunction ('joining word') such as 'and', 'so', or 'but', as in the following example:
✓ *The benefits of this kind of therapy are substantial, and there are relatively few adverse side effects.*
- If the two sentences are short and they are of **equal grammatical weight and value, it is best to use a semicolon.**
✓ *The benefits of this kind of therapy are substantial; the adverse side effects are relatively few.*
- If the two sentences are already rather long, it is better to put a full stop between and have two separate sentences.
✓ *The reported benefits of this kind of therapy are substantial, particularly when used in conjunction with more traditional approaches. However, there are relatively few adverse side effects and these are generally not severe.*

2. Run on sentence

Run on sentences are the same as the comma splice errors described above, except that there is no comma placed between the two sentences. These are less frequent than comma splice errors and can be fixed in the same way.

✗ *The benefits of this kind of therapy are substantial there are relatively few adverse side effects.*

3. Sentence fragment

A fragment is an incomplete sentence. Fragments may be missing a verb or a subject or they may not convey a complete thought.

Example of a fragment that has a subject and a verb but does not express a complete thought.

✗ *Because the lemming was heading towards the cliff.* ⇐ FRAGMENT

The above fragment contains a subject and a verb, but it does not contain a complete thought. We have the reason for something, but we don't have the 'something'. This is the most common form of fragment error. The word 'Because' at the beginning has turned a complete sentence ('*The lemming was heading towards the cliff.*') into a fragment, which requires another part to be a complete sentence.

To correct this sentence it needs another part. For example:

✓ *Because the lemming was heading towards the cliff, others decided to follow.*

There are many words similar to 'because' that when used in this way, require another part to make a full sentence. Some examples are given in the table below. Don't be confused. This doesn't mean that you can't start a sentence with 'Because' (a common urban grammar myth!). You *can* start a sentence with 'Because' as long as you make sure to include the *other* part of the sentence.

	Fragment example
because	Because measurements were not taken at regular intervals.
although	Although the fracture was not observed.
whereas	Whereas the left ear showed no sign of swelling.
since	Since there were no other parameters.
unless	Unless future studies find otherwise.

All of the fragments in the above table could be corrected by adding another sentence part with a subject and a verb.

Example of a fragment with no verb or subject

✗ *Being a very headstrong and independent lemming with a mind of her own.*

This fragment does not contain a full verb or a subject. The word 'being' at the beginning of the sentence looks like a verb, but it is really only part of one. To be a full verb, an -ing word needs to be combined with a 'helping verb' such as am, is, are, was or were. (e.g. The lemming *is being* stubborn). To fix the fragment in the above example, another part needs to be added to make it a complete sentence.

✓ *Being a very headstrong and independent lemming with a mind of her own, Fifi did not join the others in their rush towards the cliff.*

Here's another example of a fragment.

✗ *At the edge of the extremely steep cliff near a group of boulders.*

The example above is a fragment because it only tells us the 'where' part of the sentence. It does not contain a subject or a verb. We don't know who is doing what. The fragment needs another part to make it a complete sentence.

✓ *At the edge of the extremely steep cliff near a group of boulders, the lemmings gathered for a brief, final meeting.*

4. Subject verb agreement

In English grammar, subjects must 'agree with' verbs. We use different forms of verbs for different types of subjects. The following table gives some examples.

subject	example of subject	Verb	object
I	(I)	Like	learning grammar. that game. doing it.
You	(You)		
We	My friends and I		
They	The people in the pub		
He	That guy in our lab	Likes	chocolate.
She	The woman in the photo		
It	(Even) my dog		

Subject verb agreement with the verb 'to be' is a little more complicated.

subject	example of subject	verb (to be)	complement/adverbial
I	(I)	Am	a great example. extremely unreliable. in the right place. Intoxicated.
You	(You)	Are	
We	My friends and I		
They	The people in the pub		
He	That guy in our lab	Is	
She	The woman in the photo		
It	(Even) my dog		

Making subjects agree with verbs is fairly easy when the sentence is short and the subject is right next to its verb. However, when sentences are long and complex, subject verb agreement can be more difficult, as in the following example.

✗ **Punctuating** long sentences, such as the ones in the following examples, **cause** difficulties for many writers.
(verb)

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(verb)

This is similar to example 2. The first sentence is difficult to read and its meaning is not clear because the words 'lab' and 'reports' are often used together as a compound noun. In the second example, a comma separates the adverbial element

Example 4

- ✗ *Recent studies on the mating behaviour of the endangered three toed sloth from South America, have analysed the frequency of the 'ay-ay' mating call.*
- ✓ *Recent studies on the mating behaviour of the endangered three toed sloth from South America have analysed the frequency of the 'ay-ay' mating call.*

Do not use a comma after the subject of a sentence. When the subject of a sentence is very long, you may feel that you need to put a comma between the subject and the verb. This is not correct.

6. Parallel structure

Problems with maintaining parallel structure often occur when constructing lists, either as dot points or within a sentence. Items in a list should be the same type of word in terms of grammar, for example, a list of nouns or a list of verbs. The following examples should illustrate.

- ✗ *The objectives of this review are:*
 - *Outlining the main conceptual areas behind the science of navel gazing*
 - *To give an account of the controversy surrounding the benefits of navel gazing*
 - *The different ways to navel gaze*

Each of the dot points has a different grammatical form. To give the items in the list parallel structure, they should have the same grammatical form as in the list of verbs (actions) below.

- ✓ *The objectives of this review are to:*
 - *outline the main conceptual areas behind the science of navel gazing*
 - *give an account of the controversy surrounding the benefits of navel gazing*
 - *describe the different ways to navel gaze.*

7. Apostrophes

Apostrophes are notoriously difficult to use correctly. There is even a website showing examples of 'apostrophe abuse' on signs from around the world:

www.apostropheabuse.com/

However, once you know the rules, it's really not that hard.

Apostrophes are used for two main reasons:

1. To denote a missing letter

When we put two short words together, we use an apostrophe to show that a letter is missing. It is **not common** to use these shortened forms in academic writing. Here are some examples.

do not	⇒	don't
is not	⇒	isn't
you are	⇒	you're
it is	⇒	it's
we are	⇒	we're

We do not use an apostrophe to make an abbreviation or acronym (e.g. CD, USB, ATM) plural. Also, we do not use an apostrophe when making years plural. So,

✗	✓
CD's	CDs
USB's	USBs
ATM's	ATMs
1960's	1960s
90's	90s

2. To denote possession

Apostrophes are used to show possession or ownership of something, as in the following examples. Note that the apostrophe is placed after the 's' if the noun is plural. We can also use *pronouns* in place of the noun. The table below contains some examples.

singular nouns	pronoun	plural nouns	pronoun
The student's writing	his/her	The students' writing	their
The paper's references	its	The papers' references	their
The bee's knees	its	The bees' knees	their
The computer's functions	its	The computers' functions	their
Robyn's office	her	n/a	n/a

We do not use apostrophes before an 's' in plural nouns where there is no possession.

A point of confusion

The words that cause the most confusion when using apostrophes are ***it's*** and ***its***.

It's – the apostrophe denotes a missing letter (i.e. short form of it is)

Its – is used to show possession but has no apostrophe (e.g. Its ears are big).

Commonly confused words

The English language can be very confusing, so it's hard to avoid mistakes. Some commonly confused words are listed below.

word confusion	explanation
effect/affect	Effect is usually a noun. e.g. <i>There was no effect on the reaction rate.</i> Affect is usually a verb (action) (<i>remember 'a' for action & affect</i>) e.g. <i>The reaction rate was not affected.</i>
would of/would have	' Would of ' is incorrect. ' Would have ' is correct. ✗ The experiment would of worked. ✓ The experiment would have worked
few/less	Use few or fewer with 'countable' nouns. e.g. <i>There were few errors.</i> Use less with 'uncountable' nouns. e.g. <i>There was less air in the container.</i>
comprise/consist	Use comprise without 'of'. e.g. <i>The sample comprised 42 males & 47 females.</i> Use consist with 'of'. e.g. <i>Water consists of hydrogen and oxygen atoms.</i>
its/it's	Use it's as a short form of 'it is' Use its as a possessive
practice/practise	Practice is a noun. e.g. <i>I need more practice with this technique.</i> Practise is a verb. e.g. <i>I need to practise this technique.</i>

Singular/plural confusion

Some commonly used words in the sciences have irregular plurals that can be confusing. The table below gives some examples.

Singular	Plural
hypothesis	hypotheses
criterion	criteria
phenomenon	phenomena
thesis	theses
datum	data
medium	media
appendix	appendices/appendixes (both correct)
bacterium	bacteria
stimulus	stimuli
index	indices/indexes (but different meanings)
analysis	analyses
axis	axes
formula	formulae/formulas (both correct)
basis	bases
diagnosis	diagnoses
parenthesis	parentheses
genus	genera