



## TWELVE COMMON ERRORS: A STUDENT SELF-EDITING GUIDE

The following list contains only brief examples and explanations intended for you to use as reminders while you are editing your papers.

1. **Sentence Fragments.** Make sure each word group you have punctuated as a sentence contains a grammatically complete and independent thought that can stand alone as an acceptable sentence.

**Incorrect:** Tests of the Shroud of Turin have produced some curious findings. For example, *the pollen of forty-eight plants native to Europe and the Middle East.*

**Revised:** Tests of the Shroud of Turin have produced some curious findings. For example, *the cloth contains the pollen of forty-eight plants native to Europe and the Middle East.*

**Incorrect:** Scientists report no human deaths due to excessive caffeine consumption. *Although caffeine does cause convulsions and death in certain animals.*

**Revised:** Scientists report no human deaths due to excessive caffeine consumption, although caffeine does cause convulsions and death in certain animals.

2. **Sentence Sprawl.** Too many equally weighted phrases and clauses produce tiresome sentences.

**Incorrect:** The hearing was planned for Monday, December 2, *but* not all of the witnesses could be available, *so* it was rescheduled for the following Friday. [There are no grammatical errors here, but the sprawling sentence does not communicate clearly and concisely.]

**Revised:** The hearing, which had been planned for Monday, December 2, was rescheduled for the following Friday so that all witnesses would be able to attend.

3. **Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers.** Place modifiers near the words they describe; be sure the modified words actually appear in the sentence.

**Incorrect:** *When writing a proposal*, an original task is set for research [*Who* is writing a proposal?]  
**Revised:** When writing a proposal, *a scholar sets* an original task for research.

**Incorrect:** Many tourists visit Arlington National Cemetery, where veterans and military personnel are buried every day from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m.  
**Revised:** Every day from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., many tourists visit Arlington National Cemetery, where veterans and military personnel are buried.

4. **Faulty Parallelism.** Be sure you use grammatically equal sentence elements to express two or more matching ideas or items in a series.

**Incorrect:** The candidate's goals include winning the election, a health program, and education.  
**Revised:** The candidate's goals include *winning* the election, *enacting* a national health program, and *improving* the educational system.

**Incorrect:** Some *critics are* not so much opposed to capital punishment as *postponing* it for so long.  
**Revised:** Some *critics are* not so much opposed to sentencing convicts to capital punishment as they *are* to *postponing* executions for so long.

5. **Unclear Pronoun Reference.** Pronouns must clearly refer to definite referents [nouns]. Use *it*, *they*, *that*, *these*, *those*, and *which* carefully to prevent confusion.

**Incorrect:** Einstein was a brilliant mathematician. *This* is how he was able to explain the workings of the universe.

**Revised:** Einstein, *who* was a brilliant mathematician, *used his quantitative ability* to explain the workings of universe.

**Incorrect:** Because Senator Martin is less interested in the environment than in economic development, she sometimes neglects *it*.

**Revised:** Because of her interest in economic development, Senator Martin sometimes neglects *the environment*.

6. **Pronoun Agreement.** Be sure that each pronoun agrees in number (singular or plural) with the noun to which it refers (its antecedent or referent).

**Incorrect:** When *a candidate* runs for office, *they* must expect to have *their* personal life scrutinized.

**Revised:** When *candidates* run for office, *they* must expect to have *their* personal lives scrutinized.

**Incorrect:** According to tenets of the “new urbanism,” *everyone* needs to consider the relationship of *their* house to the surrounding community.

**Revised:** According to tenets of the “new urbanism,” *everyone* needs to consider the relationship of *his or her* house to the surrounding community.

7. **Incorrect Pronoun Case.** Determine whether the pronoun is being used as a subject, object, or possessive in the sentence, and select the pronoun form to match.

**Incorrect:** Castro’s communist principles inevitably led to an ideological conflict between *he* and President Kennedy.

**Revised:** Castro’s communist principles inevitably led to an ideological conflict between *him* and President Kennedy.

**Incorrect:** Because strict constructionists recommend fidelity to the Constitution as written, no one objects more than *them* to judicial reinterpretation.

**Revised:** Because strict constructionists recommend fidelity to the Constitution as written, no one objects more than *they* [object] to judicial reinterpretation.

8. **Omitted Commas.** Use commas to signal nonrestrictive or nonessential material to prevent confusion, and to indicate relationships among ideas and sentence parts.

**Incorrect:** When it comes to *eating people* differ in their tastes.

**Revised:** When it comes to eating, people differ in their tastes.

**Incorrect:** The Huns who were Mongolian invaded Gaul in 451.

**Revised:** The Huns, who were Mongolian, invaded Gaul in 451. [“Who were Mongolian” adds information but does not change the core meaning of the sentence because Huns were a Mongolian people; it is therefore *nonrestrictive* or *nonessential* and should be set apart with commas.]

9. **Superfluous Commas.** Unnecessary commas make sentences difficult to read.

**Incorrect:** Field trips are required, in several courses, such as, botany and geology. **Revised:** Field trips are required in several courses, such as botany and geology.

**Incorrect:** The term “scientific illiteracy,” has become almost a cliché in educational circles.

**Revised:** The term “scientific illiteracy” has become almost a cliché in educational circles.

10. **Comma Splice.** Do not link two independent clauses with a comma (unless you also use a coordinating conjunction and, or, but, for, nor, so yet). Instead use a period or semicolon, or rewrite the sentence.

**Incorrect:** In 1952 Japan's gross national product was one third that of France, by the late 1970s it was larger than the GNPs of France and Britain combined.

**Revised:** In 1952 Japan's gross national product was one third that of France. By the late 1970s it was larger than the GNPs of France and Britain combined.

**Incorrect:** Diseased coronary arteries are often surgically bypassed, however half of bypass grafts fail within ten years.

**Revised:** Diseased coronary arteries are often surgically bypassed; however, half of bypass grafts fail within ten years.

**11. Apostrophe Errors.** Apostrophes indicate possessives and contractions but not plurals. Caution: *its*, *your*, *their*, and *whose* are *possessives* (but no apostrophes). *It's*, *you're*, *they're*, and *who's* are contractions.

**Incorrect:** In the current conflict *its* uncertain *who's* borders *their* contesting.

**Revised:** In the current conflict *it is* [it's] uncertain *whose* borders *they are* [they're] contesting.

**Incorrect:** The Aztecs ritual's of renewal increased in frequency over the course of time.

**Revised:** The Aztecs' rituals of renewal increased in frequency over the course of time.

**12. Words Easily Confused.** Effect is most often a noun (the effect) and affect is most often a verb. Other pairs commonly confused: lead/led and accept/except. Check a glossary of usage to find the right choice.

**Incorrect:** The recession had a negative *affect* on sales.

**Revised:** The recession had a negative *effect* on sales. (or) The recession *affected* sales negatively.

**Incorrect:** The laboratory instructor *choose* not to offer detailed *advise*.

**Revised:** The laboratory instructor *chose* not to offer detailed *advice*.