



# 12 COMMON PROBLEMS: AN EDITING CHECKLIST

(Adapted from materials at the University of Wisconsin Writing Lab.)  
Revised August 2013

Use the following checklist to edit your papers for some of the most common writing problems.

## 1. *Sentence Fragments*

*Make sure each word group you have punctuated as a sentence contains a grammatically complete and independent thought (subject + verb) that can stand alone as an acceptable sentence.*

Original: 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.

Original: 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*

*Avoid using too many coordinate (joined by and, or, but) and subordinate (joined by which, that, who, where) structures in a single sentence.*

Original: 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, and then all the witnesses could attend.

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

## 3. *Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers*

*Place modifiers (adjectives; adverbs) near the words they describe; be sure the modified words actually appear in the sentence.*

Original: When writing a proposal, an original task is set for research.

Revised: When writing a proposal, a scholar sets an original task for research.

Original: 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.*

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

Original: 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 capital punishment as they are to postponing it for so long.

#### **5. Unclear Pronoun Reference.**

*Be sure all pronouns clearly refer to definite referents (nouns). Use troublesome pronouns (this, that, these, those, which) carefully to prevent confusion.*

Original: Einstein was a brilliant mathematician. This is how he was able to explain the universe.  
Revised: Einstein, who was a brilliant mathematician, used his ability with numbers to explain the universe.

Original: Some social scientists study the moral meaning of athletic aggression, which is very complex.  
Revised: Social scientists who study sports sometimes find that the moral meaning of athletic aggression is very complex.

#### **6. Incorrect Pronoun Case.**

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

Original: 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.

Original: 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 to judicial reinterpretation.

#### **7. Omitted Commas.**

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

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

Original: The Huns who were Mongolian invaded Gaul in 451.

Revised: The Huns, who were Mongolian, invaded Gaul in 451.

### **8. Superfluous Commas.**

*Avoid unnecessary commas, which make sentences difficult to read.*

Original: 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.

Original: 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.

### **9. Comma Splices.**

*Do not link two independent clauses (complete sentences) 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.*

Original: 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.

Original: Potassium cyanide caused many deaths among photographers, in the nineteenth century it was a stock chemical in every darkroom.

Revised: Potassium cyanide, a stock chemical in every nineteenth-century darkroom, caused the deaths of many photographers.

### **10. Apostrophe Errors.**

*Be sure to use apostrophes to indicate possessives and contractions but not plurals. (Caution: Its, your, their, and whose are possessives but do not require apostrophes. It’s, you’re, they’re, and who’s are contractions, not possessives.)*

Original: In the current conflict, its uncertain who’s borders their contesting.

Revised: In the current conflict, it’s uncertain whose borders they’re contesting.

Original: 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.

### **11. Words Easily Confused.**

*Effect is most often a noun (the effect), and affect is almost always a verb. Other word-pairs commonly confused include lead/led and accept/except. Check a glossary of usage to find the right choice.*

Original: The recession had a negative affect on sales.

Revised: The recession had a negative effect on sales.

(or)

The recession affected sales negatively.

Original: The laboratory instructor chose not to offer detailed advise.

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

## **12. Misspellings.**

*Spelling errors are usually perceived as a reflection of the writer's careless attitude toward the whole project. Don't allow your hard work to be marred in this way. In addition to comprehensive dictionaries, you may want to use electronic spell checks, spelling dictionaries, and lists of frequently misspelled words found in handbooks. Use caution, however, when using spell checks; often a word may be spelled correctly, but can be the wrong word for the context. Always proofread your writing.*

The preceding list includes only brief examples and explanations intended for you to use as reminders while editing your papers. If you have other questions about your writing, talk to your instructor, or consult a handbook for additional examples and complete explanations.

Suggested writing handbooks:

- ***Common Errors in English Usage*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, by Paul Brians**
  - Call number: **PE 1464 .B75 2009**
- ***The McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Misspelled and Easily Confused Words***
  - Call number: **PE 2817 .M38 2006 REF**
- ***Rules for Writers*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, by Diana Hacker & Nancy Sommers**
  - Call number: **PE 1408 .H277 2012**