

## REMEMBERING GRAMMAR

This section starts with the basics and works toward more perplexing problems. You may well not need the initial advice, but, hey, it's short, so read through it as a reminder. Who knows – you just might find an answer to that nagging grammatical question you've always wondered about.

To start at the very beginning, let's discuss sentences. Sentences in English require a *subject* and a *verb*. This much all of us can handle without too much trouble:

Joseph walked.                      Mary rode.                      Jesus kicked.

Single subjects require single verbs; plural subjects require plural verbs. Be on the look-out for subjects that are separated by a lot of words from their verbs.

The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are the Triune God.

The Triune God – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – works in mysterious ways.  
*Theological conundrums aside, both sentences are correct.*

Two or more complete sentences may be joined in several ways:

, and                      , but                      ;                      , or                      , because

Joseph walked, and Mary rode.                      Mary rode, or Jesus kicked.  
Mary rode; Jesus slept.                      Jesus slept, but the donkey kicked.

As you can see, **you need a comma before coordinating conjunctions** (such as *and, because, but, or, nor, since, so*) when they join two complete sentences (two sets of *subject* and *verb*). Don't just use the conjunction alone.

When you combine two subjects with the same verb or two verbs with the same subject (that is, when you create a complex sentence), you don't put a comma before the conjunction. You use the comma only when you join two complete sentences.

I went to the library, but I accomplished little.  
("I went" and "I accomplished" are 2 *subject-verb* pairs.)

*versus*

I went to the library but accomplished little. (There is only one subject – "I.")

Professor X went to the Holy Land this summer, and Professor Y went to Ohio.  
(2 *subject-verb* pairs.)

*versus*

Professors X and Y went on vacation this summer. (2 subjects, one verb)

**Joining sentences with a comma alone is *not* allowed. This is called a “comma splice,” and although it is a very common error, professors will still nail you for it.**

*wrong*  
I went to the library, I had to study.

*right*  
I went to the library, because I had to study.

I was upset, it was closed.

I was upset; it was closed.

*The Elements of Style* says that it is permissible to join short sentences together (p.7), but be aware that most academic writing still avoids comma splices.

Sentence Fragments:

A fragment occurs when you don't have a complete sentence. Few people would make this mistake when the sentence is simple (like our first examples). Of course, things get trickier as you add more words to the sentence. Fragments can sneak into your paper when the subject or the verb or the entire clause is modified by another word.

Martin Luther wrote his *Theses* in Wittenberg. ← This is a complete sentence.

Because Martin Luther wrote his *Theses* in Wittenberg. ← Adding the word *because* makes it a fragment.

Any of the following words turns an *independent clause* (that is, a sentence that can stand on its own) into a *dependent clause* (that is, a series of words with a subject *and* a verb that still depends on being attached to another sentence):

|             |               |          |
|-------------|---------------|----------|
| after       | if            | what     |
| although    | in order that | when     |
| as          | rather than   | whenever |
| as if       | since         | where    |
| as though   | so that       | wherever |
| because     | than          | whether  |
| before      | that          | which    |
| even if     | though        | while    |
| even though | unless        | who      |
| for         | until         | whom     |
| how         |               | whose    |
|             |               | why      |

**WORDS INTRODUCING  
DEPENDENT CLAUSES  
(a.k.a. SUBORDINATING  
CONJUNCTIONS)**

Dependent clauses make our writing more interesting and more sophisticated. The problem with using a dependent clause is that many people forget that it is not a sentence by itself. It looks like a sentence because it has its own *subject - verb* pair, but the conjunction keeps it from being a complete sentence.

*wrong*

*right*

When Luther wrote his ninety-five theses.

The Reformation began when Luther wrote his ninety-five theses.

He nailed them to the cathedral door. So that people could read them.

He nailed them to the cathedral door, so that people could read them.

Before Adam and Eve tasted the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden.

Before Adam and Eve tasted the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, life was blissfully ignorant.

When a dependent clause introduces a sentence, it is usually followed by a comma.

### **Relative Pronouns**

The relative pronouns (*that, which, who, whom, and whose*) also subordinate the clauses that follow them.

*wrong*

The man who wrote the *Summa Theologica*, which was influenced by neo-Aristotelianism.

← Although there are two verbs in this clause, *wrote* and *was influenced*, they are both part of parenthetical phrases. The clause has no verb of its own, so it is a fragment.

When clauses or phrases come in the middle of a sentence, in order to modify other words, they are usually set off by commas.

My parish, which really cares about me, has encouraged me to retire.

In 1703, when John Wesley was born, America was still a colony of England.

### **Restrictive and Nonrestrictive Phrases or Clauses**

A clause or phrase that restricts (or specifies) the noun/pronoun being discussed is *not* set off by commas.

The professor who uses the office above mine has a squeaky chair.  
*Because there are many professors, you must specify or restrict the one you are describing.*

The dean of the divinity school, Greg Jones, also teaches theology.  
*Because there is only one dean of the school, the phrase is a description or elaboration and not a restriction; use commas.*

Compare these two sentences.

My parish, which is in Wilmington, has a lovely parsonage.  
 My parish that is in Wilmington has a lovely parsonage.

The second implies that you have more than one parish; you are specifying which one you are talking about.

### Participial Phrases

Another kind of phrase begins with a participle (a verb ending in *-ing*). Be sure that the phrase refers to the subject of the sentence. (Otherwise, you have the dreaded “dangling modifier” on your hands!)

*wrong*  
 Old and infertile, God had surprises in store for Sarah.

*right*  
 Old and infertile, Sarah was in for a big surprise.

Being fully human, Satan’s offers must have been tempting.

Being fully human, Jesus must have considered Satan’s offers.

### Pronouns

Pronouns keep us from having to repeat ourselves and sound silly:

James wanted to go to James's house to get James's sandals before James went fishing with James's brother.

This sentence is easily rectified with pronouns. But pronouns can also be the source of much confusion, because you need to use the right kind depending on its function in the sentence. If the pronoun is used as a **subject**, then it must come from the following chart:

|             |      |
|-------------|------|
| I           | we   |
| you         | you  |
| he, she, it | they |

I am the church; you are the church; we are the church together.

If the pronoun is used as an **object** of any kind, then it must be from the following chart:

|              |      |
|--------------|------|
| me           | us   |
| you          | you  |
| him, her, it | them |

The three ways pronouns are most often used as objects are as direct objects, indirect objects or as objects of a preposition.

Direct Object: object of the action of a verb

Jesus blessed them. He taught us.

Indirect Object: the noun or pronoun that receives the direct object; the secondary object of the action

Jesus gave them his blessing. They gave him a headache.

Object Of The Preposition:

Jesus gave it to them. He died for us.

When used singly, pronouns usually don't cause trouble. **The most common error comes whenever pronouns are combined with other nouns or pronouns.** If you treat each word individually, you can usually solve the problem.

Professor X gave Larry and I extra reading. *This is wrong, wrong, wrong.*  
*It sounds correct only because we have had "and I" drilled so relentlessly into our heads.*  
*Separate the objects:*

Professor X gave Larry extra reading. + Professor X gave me extra reading.

= Professor X gave Larry and me extra reading.

More examples of pronouns that sound odd but are in fact correct:

The assignment was really hard for Bruno and me.

I spoke to Larry and him last night.

We went to the lecture with Judas and her.

There is a tension between Judas and me.

With her and me, it is always a question of hermeneutics.

**Punctuation:****COMMAS**

The use of commas likely causes more confusion and frustration than any other aspect of punctuation. Unfortunately, there are exceptions and uncertainties with almost every rule. I suggest you consider the following and refer to one of the suggested style manuals if you have any hesitation regarding a comma in your writing.

In addition to setting off phrases and clauses from the rest of a sentence, commas separate items in a series:

Joseph's brothers included Ruben, Simeon, Levi, Benjamin, and Dan.

In formal writing, that last comma (after Benjamin) is still included; many modern publications, including newspapers omit it, even though it can eliminate confusion to leave it in:

This course requires a class presentation, a final exam, writing and editing two papers.  
*Will you have to write and edit two papers, or does the writing involve more than two papers?*

Commas are also used to separate modifiers (adjectives or adverbs):

Van Rad provides an exhaustive, thorough history.

As *Merriam-Webster's* handbook mentions (13), these commas are often omitted if the modifiers are short.

**SEMI-COLONS**

Use semi-colons instead of commas if the items in a series are long or contain commas of their own:

The assignments will include a short paper; a presentation, which may involve a partner; and an exam on both the reading and the lectures.

Also use a semi-colon (not a comma!) to join two independent clauses with a conjunctive adverb (*however, in fact, indeed, thus, therefore, etc.*):

The readings will not be covered in lecture; however, you will still be responsible for them on the exam.

**COLONS**

Colons are used primarily to introduce a list or a phrase or clause that elaborates what comes before it.

The team suffered from one serious shortcoming: the injury of their star lineman.  
Your grade derives from three requirements: a presentation, an exam, and a research paper.

Traditional graders usually look down upon colons that separate a verb from its object.

The readings for this week are: Anderson, Childs, Davis, and Von Rad.

Key events in this period include: the invention of the steam press, the establishment of the railroad, and the extension of voting rights.

*The colon is a mistake in both sentences. You can omit it without changing the meaning of either sentence.*

## QUOTATIONS MARKS

We will go over the proper use of quotes again when we talk about research and sources, but for now, focus on the following admittedly arbitrary rules.

1. Periods and commas ALWAYS go INSIDE quotation marks, regardless of their relation to the material quoted. (Yes, you can find printed examples of the opposite; the British do not follow this convention.)

“There are ample doses of conventional religious sentiment throughout the novel.”

Hughes dismisses this “mediocre melodrama,” despite its obvious political importance.

2. Semi-colons, colons, exclamation points and questions marks (;!?) go inside the quotation marks if they are part of the quote; otherwise, they go outside. Because semi-colons and colons are rarely part of the quoted material, they usually end up outside. You can also follow quoted material with a dash.

The governor exclaimed, “Over my dead body!”

Did the governor say, “Over my dead body”?

The governor said, “Over my dead body”; the protestors resumed their chant.

## PARENTHESSES and BRACKETS

Use a parenthesis to include asides in your own writing; a bracket to add material within a quote.

The chief of police (who is also running for mayor) quickly arrived on the scene.

The chief of police said, “I will speak with [the governor] this evening.”

Use a period to end a complete sentence within parentheses or brackets if it stands alone. If it is part of a larger sentence, do not use a period (or initial capital) with the enclosed sentence.

Next week’s reading will be Miller’s chapter on flogging. (You will find it in your packet.)

I finished next week’s reading (it was on flogging).

## APOSTROPHES and NUMBERS

When referring to a decade, an *s* is added to the date:  
the nineteen-fifties = 1950s

If you use the two-digit version of the number (a questionable practice given the Y2K debacle!), an apostrophe is used to represent the numbers omitted:

1950s ? '50s          1840s ? '40s

You could create a real mess if you tried to use both the two-digit abbreviation and a possessive *s*:

He was out of step with the '50s' sexual mores.

In such cases, it is better to reword the sentence altogether:

He was out of step with the sexual mores of the '50s [or 1950s].

Forming the possessive of quoted material can also be tricky. These examples derive from *Merriam-Webster's Concise Handbook*:

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <i>awkward</i>                                    |   | <i>better</i>  |
| After a moment or so's thought, I made my choice. | ? | After thinking for a moment or so, I made my choice.   |
| The "Marseilles's" melody is rather hard to sing. | ? | The melody of "The Marseilles" is rather hard to sing. |

## PERIODS and ELLIPSES

Two spaces follow a period if it ends a sentence (unless it is followed by a close-quotation mark; see above). A series of several periods, called an ellipsis, is used to indicate omitted material. Use three, with a single space between them, in the middle of a sentence. If the ellipsis ends the sentence, use four periods, with two spaces only after the last one. [Note: some words processing programs squeeze ellipses so small that they appear not to be spaced at all; use your judgement in giving your reader the appearance of single and double spacing.]

## TRICKY HOMONYMS:

affect/effect  
complement/compliment  
it's/its  
eminent/immanent/imminent  
precede/proceed  
prescribe/proscribe

principal/principle  
they're/their/there  
to/too/two  
who's/whose