

3.

WHO CARES ABOUT GRAMMAR?

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you will learn to

- Explain Standard American English
- Recognize common errors

What Is Standard American English?

English teachers, needless to say, can be sticklers for grammar. They may bristle when someone uses “less than” instead of “fewer than,” or when someone says “just between you and I” instead of “just between you and me.” A missing apostrophe or an incorrect semicolon can make even a laidback English teacher groan. But does anyone else really care whether you put your commas in the right place or if you write “who” instead of “whom”?

The answer is yes, in most cases, your readers will be more receptive to your ideas if you understand the rules of Edited American English. Also known as Standard American English and sometimes referred to as “good English,” Edited American English is a dialect. A dialect is an accepted way of speaking in certain groups. Whether you have a Tennessee dialect or a Southern California dialect, you unconsciously follow certain ways of speaking with other people from the same area. In academic settings, Edited American English is the dialect you’re expected to use when writing essays. But guess what? *No one speaks Edited American English*—not even English professors! Writing for an academic audience, therefore, is always a matter of translating the ways we typically speak and write into Edited American English.

Edited American English follows what are often referred to as grammar and punctuation rules. Most grammar and punctuation rules—the ones that really matter—exist because they help us communicate clearly. Commas, for example, set off parts of your sentences so that your complex ideas are easier to understand. If you

don't put periods at the ends of your sentences, your reader is likely to get confused. Other rules, though, are more a matter of convention; they exist not because they matter much in terms of clarity, but because someone decided those are the words we should use or that's the way we should put the punctuation marks on the page. For example, no one is confused if an apostrophe is missing or if someone uses the subject pronoun "I" instead of the object pronoun "me." If you live in the south, you might say "had went" instead of "had gone," and no one asks you what you mean.

Finally, some rules are rules in one circumstances but not another. If you're taking a journalism class, your professor might tell you not to use the Oxford or serial comma, whereas your English professor will definitely want you to use it. If you're texting a friend, you might not use periods whereas if you're emailing your employer, you're likely to follow all punctuation rules.

So, how important is it to learn the rules of Editing American English? While some professors *claim* they don't care about grammar and punctuation, the truth is, anyone who is educated will likely respond well to writing that adheres to Edited American English—and they'll respond less positively to writing that contains errors. Even if they don't know what to call certain errors, most educated readers know when something doesn't sound right, and they certainly know when something isn't clear. Major errors can confuse your readers while minor errors might distract or annoy them. Knowing the rules of Edited American English, therefore, will always, always put you at an advantage. English professors are not the only people who will be impressed with clear, concise, and engaging sentences.

But What If I Never Learned These Rules?

Many students claim that they never learned grammar and punctuation rules. Either their teachers didn't teach them the rules, or the rules never really made a lot of sense to them. They may worry that their professors will think less of them if they make mistakes in their writing, but in a first-semester college English class, professors know many of their students will need to brush up on the mechanics of writing.

The good news is, anyone who has been writing and speaking English for some time *has* learned certain rules. No one, though, not even those of us born speaking English, thinks about the rules when speaking or when writing to friends. We simply write or speak in a way that we hope is clear and interesting. When writing essays for your college classes, you should do the same: write as clearly as you can so that educated readers will understand and appreciate your ideas. Then, edit.

If you worry about sounding formal and being correct as you're writing a first draft, you're more likely to neglect some of the other issues you need to think about, such as organization and being specific. Even writers who know the rules of Edited American English will make mistakes as they struggle to get ideas on the page, but they know that writing is a process, and they come back to their work to edit.

Editing, though, doesn't work if you don't know what to look for. If no one has ever told you that you tend to have comma splices in your writing, or that you need to learn the differences between affect and effect, you

are not likely to see those errors when you edit. Successful editing, therefore, doesn't require learning all the rules of Edited American English; instead, you need to learn the mistakes you tend to make and look for those when you edit your essays. A good English professor can help you learn to recognize these errors. You can also take advantage of your college's support services, like free tutoring. Neither your professor nor a good tutor will fix your errors for you because how will that help you learn to edit on your own? Good professors and tutors will point out the errors, help you understand why they are errors, and offer suggestions for how to recognize and correct the errors.

What are the Most Common Errors?

Everyone makes different mistakes, so the best way to learn to edit is to learn which mistakes you tend to make, but reviewing the list of common errors below might help you start to recognize errors in your writing. The list is adapted from the University of Wisconsin's Writing Center (<https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/grammarpunct/commonerrors/>).

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, also known as an "independent clause."

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.

[2nd sentence = fragment]

Correct

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.

[2nd sentence = fragment]

Correct

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

2. Misplaced and dangling modifiers

A modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that describes another word, phrase, or clause in a sentence. 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 the proposal?]

Correct

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. [sounds as if people are being buried there everyday between 9:00 and 5:00]

Correct

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.

3. Faulty parallelism

Be sure you use grammatically equal sentence elements—words, phrases, clauses—to express two or more matching ideas or items in a series.

Incorrect

The candidate's goals include winning the election, a national health program, and the educational system.

Correct

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.

Correct

Some critics are not so much opposed to capital punishment as they are to postponing it for so long.

4. Unclear pronoun reference

All pronouns must clearly refer to definite referents [nouns]. Use **it**, **they**, **this**, **that**, **these**, **those**, and **which** carefully to prevent confusion.

Unclear:

Einstein was a brilliant mathematician. This is how he was able to explain the universe.

Clear:

Einstein, a brilliant mathematician, used his ability with numbers to explain the universe.

Unclear:

Because Senator Martin is less interested in the environment than in economic development, he sometimes neglects it.

Clear:

Because of his interest in economic development, Senator Martin sometimes neglects the environment.

5. Incorrect pronoun case

Determine whether the pronoun is being used as a subject, or an object, or a 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.

Correct:

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.

Correct:

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

6. 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.

Correct:

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

Incorrect:

The Huns who were Mongolian invaded Gaul in 451.

Correct:

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; this material is therefore nonrestrictive or nonessential.]

7. Superfluous commas

Unnecessary commas make sentences difficult to read.

Unclear:

Field trips are required, in several courses, such as, botany and geology.

Clear:

Field trips are required in several courses, such as botany and geology.

Unclear:

The term, "scientific illiteracy," has become almost a cliché, in educational circles.

Clear:

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

8. Comma splices

Comma splices link two independent clauses or complete sentences with a comma. Instead, use a period or semicolon, or rewrite the sentence.

Comma splice:

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.

Correct:

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.

Comma splice:

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

Correct:

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

9. Run-on Sentences

A run-on sentence is not a long sentence. A sentence can be half a page long and be correct. A run-on or fused sentence is when two complete sentences are joined without any punctuation or transitions. Run-on sentences can be especially confusing because the reader won’t know the relationship between the two sentences.

Incorrect: The forecast calls for rain our picnic is canceled.

Correct: The forecast calls for rain; our picnic is canceled. OR The forecast calls for rain, so our picnic is canceled. OR The forecast calls for rain; therefore, our picnic is canceled.

Incorrect: Take a moment to relax you’ll feel better.

Correct: Take a moment to relax; you’ll feel better. OR Take a moment to relax, and you’ll feel better. OR Taking a moment to relax will make you feel better.

10. Apostrophe Errors

Apostrophes indicate possession for nouns (“**Jim’s hat**,” “**several years’ work**”) but not for personal pronouns (**its, your, their, and whose**). Apostrophes also indicate omissions in contractions (“**it’s**” = “**it is**”). In general, they are *not* used to indicate plurals.

Incorrect:

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

Correct:

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.

Correct:

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 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.

Correct:

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

Incorrect:

The laboratory instructor chose not to offer detailed advise.

Correct:

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, use electronic spell checks, spelling dictionaries, and lists of frequently misspelled words found in handbooks.

Key Takeaways

- No one speaks or writes Edited American English, so everyone needs to edit their work
- Editing your work for correctness and clarity will always make your writing stronger
- Everyone makes different mistakes, but knowing some common errors can help you edit