



Grammar: Proofreading for common surface errors

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1. Verbs

Verbs can be in either active or passive voice. In active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action of the verb; in passive voice, the subject receives the action of the verb. Readers typically find active voice sentences more vigorous and clearer; for these reasons, writers usually prefer active voice.

- Passive: **The ball** was kicked by the boy.
- Active: **The boy** kicked the ball.
- Passive: **A decision** was reached by the committee.
- Active: **The committee** reached a decision.
- Passive: **Many arguments** are offered against abortion.
- Active: **Religious leaders** offer many arguments against abortion.

Notice that in the passive voice examples, the doer of the action is either at the end of the sentence in a prepositional phrase or, in the third example, is missing entirely from the sentence. In each active voice example, however, the doer of the action is in the subject position at the beginning of the sentence.

On some occasions, however, you might have a good reason for choosing a passive construction; for example, you might choose the passive if you want to emphasize the receiver of the action or minimize the importance of the actor.

- Appropriate passive: The medical records were destroyed in the fire.
- Appropriate passive: The experiment was performed successfully.

Passive voice verbs always include a form of the verb *to be*, such as *am*, *are*, *was*, *is being*, and so on. To check for active versus passive voice, look for sentences that contain a form of this verb, and see whether in these sentences the subject of the sentence performs the action of the verb.

If you shift verb tense (for example, from past to present tense) in a sentence or passage without a good reason, you may confuse your reader.

- Wrong: After he **joined** the union, Sam **appears** at a rally and **makes** a speech.
- Right: After he joined the union, Sam **appeared** at a rally and **made** a speech.

To proofread for verb tense errors, circle all verbs in your writing. Look at the verbs in sequence and check that you haven't changed tense unintentionally.

2. Subject-Verb Agreement

Make sure that the subject and verb of each clause or sentence agree—that is, that a singular subject has singular verb, and a plural subject a plural verb. When other words come between subject and verb, you may mistake the noun nearest to the verb—before and after—for the verb's real subject.

- Wrong: A central **part** of my life goals **have been** to go to law school.
- Right: A central **part** of my life goals **has been** to go to law school.
- Wrong: The **profits** earned by the cosmetic industry **is** not high.
- Right: The **profits** earned by the cosmetic industry **are** not high.

Be particularly careful that your subject and verb agree when your subject is made up of two or more parts joined by *and* or *or*; when your subject is a word like *committee* or *jury*, which can take either a singular or a plural verb depending on whether it is treated as a unit or as a group of individuals; or when your subject is a word like *mathematics* or *measles*, which looks plural but is singular in meaning.

- Wrong: **My brother** and his **friend** *commutes* every day from Louisville.
- Right: My **brother** and his **friend** *commute* every day from Louisville.
- Wrong: The **committee** *was taking* all the responsibility themselves.
- Right: The **committee** *were taking* all the responsibility themselves.
- Wrong: **Measles** *have become* less common in the United States.
- Right: **Measles** *has become* less common in the United States.

To proofread for subject-verb agreement, circle the subject and verb in each sentence and be sure they agree.

3. Pronouns

A pronoun (*like I, it, you, him, her, this, themselves, someone, who, which*) is used to replace another word—its antecedent—so that the antecedent does not have to be repeated. Check each pronoun to make sure that it agrees with its antecedent in gender and number. Remember that words like *each, either, neither, and one* are singular; when they are used as antecedents, they take singular pronouns. Antecedents made up of two or more parts joined by *or* or *nor* take pronouns that agree with the nearest antecedents.

Collective noun antecedents (audience, team) can be singular or plural depending on whether they refer to a single unit or a group of individuals.

- Wrong: Every **one** of the puppies thrived in **their** new home
- Right: Every **one** of the puppies thrived in **its** new home.
- Wrong: **Neither Jane nor Susan** felt that **they** had been treated fairly.
- Right: **Neither Jane nor Susan** felt that **she** had been treated fairly.
- Wrong: The **team** frequently changed **its** positions to get varied experience.
- Right: The **team** frequently changed **their** positions to get varied experience.

To proofread for agreement of pronouns and antecedents, circle each pronoun, identify its antecedent, and make sure that they agree in gender and number.

As noted above, most *indefinite pronouns* (like *each*, *either*, *neither*, or *one*) are singular; therefore, they take singular verbs. A *relative pronoun*, like *who*, *which*, or *that*, takes a verb that agrees with the pronoun's antecedent.

- Wrong: **Each** of the items in these designs **coordinate** with the others.
- Right: **Each** of the items in these designs **coordinates** with the others.
- Wrong: He is one of the **employees** who **works** overtime regularly
- Right: He is one of the **employees** who **work** overtime regularly.

(In this example, the antecedent of who is employees, and therefore the verb should be plural.)

A vague pronoun reference occurs when readers cannot be sure of a pronoun's antecedent. If a pronoun could refer to more than one antecedent, or if the antecedent is implied but not explicitly stated, revise the sentence to make the antecedent clear.

- Wrong: Before Mary assaulted Mrs. Turpin, **she** was a judgmental woman.
- Right: Before Mary assaulted Mrs. Turpin, **the latter** was a judgmental woman.
- Wrong: They believe that an egg is as important as a human being, but **it** can't be proved.
- Right: They believe that the egg is as important as a human being, but **such an assertion** can't be proved.

4. Other Grammatical Errors

The sentence fragment is an incomplete sentence punctuated as a sentence. To make it a complete sentence, **join it to the main clause or rewrite it.**

- Wrong: She is a good friend. A person whom I trust and admire.
- Right: She is a good friend, **a** person whom I trust and admire.
- Wrong: In the workshop, we learned the value of discipline. Also how to take good notes.
- Right: In the workshop, we learned the value of discipline. **We also learned** how to take good notes.
- Wrong: The old aluminum bat sitting on its trailer.
- Right: The old aluminum boat **was** sitting on its trailer.

To proofread for sentence fragments, check all sentences for a subject, a verb, and at least one clause that does not begin with a subordinating word like *as*, *although*, *if*, *when*, *that*, *since*, or *who*.

Misplaced or dangling modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses not clearly connected to the word they modify. Move a misplaced modifier closer to the word it describes, or revise a sentence to give a dangling modifier a word to modify.

- Wrong: **They** could see the eagles swooping and diving **with binoculars**.
- Right: **With binoculars**, **they** could see the eagles swooping and diving.
- Wrong: **Nixon** told reporters that he planned to get out of politics **after he lost the 1962 gubernational race**.
- Right: After he lost the 1962 gubernational race, Nixon told reporters that he planned to get out of politics.
- Wrong: A rabbit's teeth are never used for defense even **when cornered**.
- Right: Even when cornered, a rabbit never uses its teeth for defense.
- Wrong: **As a young boy**, his grandmother told stories of her years as a country schoolteacher.
- Right: **As a young boy**, **he** heard his grandmother tell stories of her years as a country schoolteacher.

To proofread for misplaced or dangling modifiers, circle all modifiers and draw a line to the word they describe; be sure they can't mistakenly modify some other word.

5. General Proofreading Suggestions

- Familiarize yourself with the errors you commonly make by looking over writing that has already been marked. Make a list of your errors, and check your writing for each of them.

- **Carefully** and **slowly** read your writing out loud. Often your ear will hear what your eye did not see.
- Read your writing, sentence by sentence, from the last sentence to the first sentence. This technique interrupts the logical flow of the prose and neutralizes any impression of correctness arising from your knowledge of what you meant to say.
- Use your dictionary to check any words you are unsure about, and to check for correct prepositions, verb tenses, and irregular forms.

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