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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