CHAPTER 12: RECOGNIZING HOW GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION WORK

Chapter 12 deals with grammar and punctuation, a topic that many students dread, since they see it in terms of being marked wrong in matters they place little value on and do not understand. In this chapter, we seek to remedy this problem, not by insisting that you memorize obscure terms and secret codes that are of little use to you outside of this narrow field but by making your writing communicate your ideas with clarity and purpose.

We include many of these terms, and you may learn them if you like, but our real purpose in giving them is to allow you to move, at the end of this chapter, to writing better by recognizing and eliminating from your work common mistakes in grammar and punctuation. In order to use the last two sections of this chapter, on punctuation and common errors, you need to be able to identify such matters as word classes, parts of a sentence, clauses and phrases, and so on. You will thereby be able to understand the conventions, which will, in turn, help you to write better.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, the following questions about grammar are answered:

- What is standard written English (SWE), and how can you learn to communicate effectively in it?
- How do you identify the major components of a sentence?
- How do you use different types of sentences effectively in your writing?
- How do you use punctuation to make your writing clear?
- How can you ensure that you are not committing the most common errors in grammar, punctuation, and usage?

Some students coming to university may suddenly find that their writing is an inadequate vehicle for their ideas and that it is severely criticized by their professors. These students have little equipment to rely on to correct their writing, and they cannot identify the word classes (or parts of speech) and punctuation problems that are marked as wrong in their writing. They need some help with using the conventions of formal writing, which, once started, will continue to improve. Our view is that some knowledge of grammar and rhetoric is an important part of critical writing and that this knowledge cannot be gained without some application and practice, which we give you in the sections that follow.

The outline for Chapter 12 follows:

Learning Objectives
Grammar and Standard Written English
Words, Phrases, Clauses, and Sentences
    Word Classes
        The Classification of Words

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Meaning Words
Asserting Words
Function or Linking Words
Nouns
Pronouns
Adjectives
Verbs
Conjugation
Types of Verbs
Inflection
Classification
Infinitives
Verbals
Adverbs
Prepositions
Conjunctions
Interjections
Parts of the Sentence
The Phrase
The Clause
The Sentence and Sentence Types
Punctuation
Period
Comma
Semicolon
Colon
Apostrophe
Other Punctuation Marks
Italics
Hyphen
Quotation Marks
Common Errors and What To Do about Them
Comma Splice
Sentence Fragment
Run-on Sentences
Dangling Modifiers
Incorrectly Placed Modifiers
Agreement Problems
Noun–Pronoun Antecedent Problems
Contractions
Chapter Summary
Further Readings

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FAQs

Will I be penalized if I do not know and use proper grammar? Although it is not common for professors to count up grammatical mistakes and make deductions from the final grade, your mistakes in written and spoken English will be noticed and, if serious enough, will make a bad impression that very likely will be reflected in your grades. Standard written English is expected in university work, and while you will not be rewarded for following these conventions, you will be penalized if you do not. Think of a covering letter sent to a prospective employer: if it is grammatically sound and is punctuated correctly, an employer will not necessarily be impressed; however, if it is full of grammatical mistakes and has many punctuation errors, the employer will probably stop reading the letter halfway through and will also stop even considering your qualifications for the job. At university and in most fields of employment it is expected that you communicate with standard English.

Why have I not been taught proper grammar and punctuation before now? You might have been lucky in having a teacher in high school who stressed standard English. Based on our experience teaching undergraduate students, we would estimate that roughly 70 percent of our students have never been given formal instruction in grammar and punctuation, at least beyond grade school. What they have acquired has been by osmosis, partly from studying another language, usually French or Spanish, partly by assimilating some of the conventions through their reading. But even these students cannot easily identify the functional parts of grammar or punctuation, or give a reasonable explanation of how English sentences work. Until quite recently, the orthodoxy in education ministries that set the curriculum was that teaching the conventions and structures of language inhibited a student from free expression—it was assumed that grammar and punctuation would somehow take care of themselves. While this too casual approach is being questioned by colleges, universities, employers, and parents, as well as government educationists, more extensive changes will be some time in taking effect. So, for the moment, this chapter will help you to meet grammar and punctuation problems in your writing. Now, when you get your assignments back with mistakes in grammar marked on them, you must make up for lost teaching by self-learning or by working through the exercises in *Foundations*, and by seeking help from your professors, tutoring services supplied by your university, or paid for privately.

What are the most common errors in grammar and punctuation? The most frequent errors in university-level writing have to do with uncertainty about what a sentence is and how its components can be controlled. These errors include the comma splice, the run-on sentence, and the sentence fragment. The next most common errors have to do with agreement problems—between subject and verb or between a pronoun and its antecedent (that is, what the pronoun is standing for). Another common error, one that is greatly on the increase, has to do with the improper use of the apostrophe, usually to make a plural (as in "The store sells book's and paper's"). All of these errors are not matters of judgment, a question of better or worse. They are mistakes, and you should learn the conventions of proper usage to avoid them by consulting *Foundations*, another guide to grammar and punctuation, or following through on some of the exercises in the many available Web sites such as those listed below.

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WEBLINKS FOR CHAPTER 12

- Anthony Hughes of the Digital Education Network has made available his Online English grammar
www.edunet.com/english/grammar/index.cfm

- ESL Grammar and other links from Gallaudet University
http://depts.gallaudet.edu/englishworks/tablecontent.html

- Gary Olson's *Punctuation Made Simple*, an online text from the University of South Florida
www.sptp.usf.edu.pms

- Grammar Doctor's Web site
www.grammardoctor.com

- Grammar Handbook at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champagne
www.english.uiuc.edu/cws/wworkshop

- Grammar Lady (Mary Newton Bruder) Web site
http://grammarlady.com

- Hypertext books on English grammar and composition from the site of Daniel Kies and the English Department of the College of DuPage
http://papyr.com/hypertextbooks/index.htm

- The Internet Grammar of English based on the survey of English usage undertaken at University College, London
www.ucl.ac.uk/internet-grammar

- Paul Brian's award-winning page on Common Errors in English from Washington State University
www.wsu.edu:8080/~brians/errors/index.html

- Punctuation by Roger Garrison from *The Purposeful Writer*
www.lakeland.cc.il.us/~rnewell/index.html

- Punctuation from the University of Ottawa
www.uottawa.ca/academic/arts/writcent/hypergrammar/punct.html

- The Online Writery at the University of Missouri
http://web.missouri.edu/~writery

- Stephen Wilbers's interactive page on avoiding the 12 most common punctuation (plus the big three!) errors
www.wilbers.com/punct12.htm

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- The Writing Lab at Purdue University has numerous handouts to be downloaded or printed
  http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/index2.html

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