

Today's Lesson - subjects
and verbs

I want to improve my
writing skills.

subject - I verb - want

A Brief Writing and Grammar Guide

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Introduction

Students have often said that English has never been their subject. They have struggled in their writing classes because it has *so* many rules that are hard to remember. Students have also stated that they do not know why they have to take English classes because they are going to be a nurse, engineer, or mechanic. What these students fail to realize is that their attitudes affect their perception of English. Admittedly, in order to write well, students must learn a lot of rules, but the more they practice the rules in their everyday lives—at home and work, in their text messages and social media posts, as well as in conversations with family and friends—the easier it will be to learn them. They will even begin to see how they can use these rules when writing a resume and cover letter, a report on a patient or project, and a letter to a teacher about their children or a company about a product or service with which they are not satisfied.

In this Brief Writing and Grammar Guide, you will learn how to write an effective essays and identify as well as correct some common grammar mistakes. A description, some examples, and practice exercises along with an answer key for them will be provided on each topic. While this guide will not teach you everything about English, it will help you to strengthen your writing skills.

Essays

An essay is a group of related paragraphs developing one main idea, which is a thesis sentence. A standard essay is typically five paragraphs long, consisting of an introduction paragraph, three body paragraphs, and conclusion paragraph. While an essay can be longer or shorter depending upon the topic and assignment guidelines, it should have at least three paragraphs in order to have one paragraph for each required part—the introduction, body, and conclusion.

Sometimes students confuse an essay with a paragraph. However, as suggested above, paragraphs make up essays. Paragraphs are a group of related sentences that develop a main idea known as the topic sentence. Some have been taught that a paragraph is three to five sentences, but to write an effective paragraph, you should make a paragraph as long as it needs to be in order to provide support for your main idea or point. Instructors do not count the number of sentences or words, for that matter, to determine your grade. We evaluate how well you have proven your point.

Each paragraph within the essay works to develop your thesis. Your essay should begin with an introduction. Its purpose is to grab your reader's attention, introduce your topic, and present your thesis. It can include a plan of development, which indicates what ideas you will use to support your thesis and the order in which they will be presented. The next section of your essay is the body. Each paragraph in the body develops an aspect of your thesis. The topic sentence indicates what part of the thesis will be explained in that paragraph as well as what the point of that paragraph is. The conclusion paragraph restates your thesis in different words and brings the point of your essay and its support to a close. It does not introduce new ideas or develop your thesis.

Below are examples of poor and good introduction and conclusion paragraphs. An explanation of what makes the introduction and conclusion poor is provided in italics. An example of an entire essay will be provided later.

Poor Introduction:

I came to college for several reasons. First, I want to improve my life. Second, I want to be able to provide for my family. Finally, I want to accomplish my dream of becoming a nurse.

This introduction is poor because it is only a summary of the points that will be discussed in the body of the essay. Why should the reader read further if you give everything away in the first paragraph? You should always aim to grab the reader's interest. Make him or her want to read further. Do not give away too much in the beginning.

Good Introduction:

People come to college for many reasons. Some come to college because their parents made them. Their parents have given them the ultimatum either to go to school, get a job, or move out of their house. In other words, they really do not want to go but attend just to make their parents happy. Others come because they have nothing else to do. Perhaps they are a stay-at-home mom or a recent retiree. They come to fill their days with something to do besides watching television or to have some other adults with whom to share ideas. They want to keep their minds stimulated. Unfortunately, some have come because they have been laid off from their jobs and have to start a new career. They have tried to get a new job but have reached stumbling blocks because of a lack of education. I, on the other hand, have come to college to improve my life, to provide for my family, and to accomplish my dream.

Poor Conclusion:

These are the reasons why I came to college. I want to improve my life, I want to provide for my family, and I want to accomplish my dream of becoming a nurse.

This conclusion is poor because it is only a summary of the points that have been discussed in the body of the essay. You have already said this. Why should the reader bother with reading these same ideas again? Often, students will use the poor introduction above and this poor conclusion in the same essay. Always try to avoid repetition. You should always aim to hold the reader's interest all the way to the end of your essay. Make him or her want to read to the very end. Do not merely summarize the supporting points you made in the body; tie those ideas together and bring your essay to a close.

Good Conclusion:

Basically, my three reasons for coming to college all stem from my desire to secure a wonderful future for my family and me. Eventually, I realized that my high school diploma and job at the department store were not going to be enough to live the life that I wanted for us. Since I wanted more, I needed to strive for more. With the way the economy and our society are today, I can only accomplish my goals to improve my life, to provide for my family, and to become a nurse if I go back to college and get a degree. These reasons were not only the motivation I needed to go back to college, but they will also be the inspiration I need to succeed in college and in life.

The thesis is the most important sentence in your paper because as indicated above, it indicates the point of your essay. Typically, it comes at the end of the introduction paragraph. Experienced writers can place their thesis in other places in the introduction or actually use an implied thesis, but until you have mastered the rules, you should follow them.

Include a title for your paper. It should indicate the topic of your essay. The first letter of all major words in your title should be capitalized. You do not need to capitalize articles and prepositions unless they are at the beginning or end of the title. Also, if you have a title and subtitle, use a colon between the two and capitalize the first word of the subtitle no matter what word it is. Finally, do not include a period at the end of the title since it is not a sentence.

According to John Langan, a well-known and respected English textbook author, a writing should have unity, support, coherence, and sentence skills. He calls these the four bases of effective writing. Unity is making sure all of the paragraphs within an essay and all of the sentences within a paragraph develop one main idea—the thesis statement in an essay and the topic sentence of a paragraph. Also, support is making sure the sentences throughout your essay provide plenty of specific evidence to support your main idea. In addition, coherence is using transition words, phrases, and/or sentences to create a flow between the sentences and paragraphs. Finally, sentence skills refer to following the grammar and punctuation rules (Langan xviii, 49).

To understand all of the information that you have just read, look at the example essay below.

Example Essay

Why I Came to College

People come to college for many reasons. Some come to college because their parents made them. Their parents have given them the ultimatum either to go to school, get a job, or move out of their house. In other words, they really do not want to go but attend just to make their parents happy. Others come because they have nothing else to do. Perhaps they are a stay-at-home mom or a recent retiree. They come to

fill their days with something to do besides watching television or to have some other adults with whom to share ideas. They want to keep their minds stimulated. Unfortunately, some have come because they have been laid off from their jobs and have to start a new career. They have tried to get a new job but have reached stumbling blocks because of a lack of education. **I, on the other hand, have come to college to improve my life, to provide for my family, and to accomplish my dream.**

Due to some unfortunate circumstances that my family experienced in the past, I came to college to make my life better. My parents struggled to provide for us. My dad had to drop out of high school in order to help take care of his family after his father passed, so he had a hard time finding a job that paid above minimum wage. My mom and dad got married while they were still young. *Therefore*, college was not an option for her because my mom began working to help him. *However*, she was limited in the number of hours she could work since she had to be home to take care of my siblings and me, for they did not have the money for a babysitter. Because of their experiences, my parents always stressed as we were growing up that my brother, sister, and I must attend college. They explained that their inability to get a good job was due in part to their lack of education. *However*, when I graduated from high school, college initially was not an option since my parents could not afford to pay for it, and as the oldest of my siblings, I wanted to help my parents support our family, especially after my mom found out she had cancer and could not help provide for the family for a while. Although I could not go to college for several years, my family's experiences caused my desire for a higher education to remain in the forefront of my mind. *Therefore*, as soon as I could afford to attend college, I signed up, for I wanted more for my future than my parents, siblings, and I had in our past.

I also came to college to be able to take care of my own children. I have been blessed with two beautiful little girls who seem to need

something new every day, not to mention everything they want. As their mother, I am responsible for providing food, clothes, and shelter. When we go to the store, they ask for Barbie dolls, Easy Bake ovens, Nintendo DS, and other things they see their friends have. Sure my job at the major department store helps me to provide their needs, but we cannot do much else. I am living paycheck to paycheck. At times, I have had to ask for help from family members and friends. While I appreciate the help that they willingly give, I do not want to live that way. I want to be able to give my daughters not only their basic needs but also some of their desires. I want to be able to take them on trips and be able to purchase things for them without worrying if I will have enough for rent. One way that I can do that is to obtain an education to get a job that pays more. Most well-paying jobs require a degree, so I must get one.

Finally, due to the help that my mother and family received while she fought cancer, I want to be a nurse, and attending college will help me to reach this goal. My mother really had a difficult experience as she battled with cancer, but the nurses at the hospital helped to keep her fighting. *In addition* to taking her vitals and administering the medication, they always knew the right words to say when she was sick from the chemotherapy and radiation. They were there to comfort her when she gave in to her fear, disappointment, and anger. They wiped her tears when she could not hide them anymore. My mother's nurses were there for my siblings and me as well. We were very scared that our mother was not going to make it and that the cancer would win, but they held our hands. They reassured us that the strong fighter we knew as our mother was the same person fighting cancer. Those nurses really helped my family during that difficult time, and I want to do the same for other families. I want to work in an oncology department at the same hospital my mother went to, so I can provide support and reassurance. *However*, of course, I can only become a nurse if I receive a degree.

Basically, my three reasons for coming to college all stem from my desire to secure a wonderful future for my family and me. Eventually, I

realized that my high school diploma and job at the department store were not going to be enough to live the life that I wanted for us. Since I wanted more, I needed to strive for more. With the way the economy and our society are today, I can only accomplish my goals to improve my life, to provide for my family, and to become a nurse if I go back to college and get a degree. These reasons were not only the motivation I needed to go back to college, but they will also be the inspiration I need to succeed in college and in life.

Notice how this essay accomplishes the four bases that Langan identified. First, the entire essay discusses why the writer came to college, which is the main idea or point, and each paragraph focuses on explaining one of those reasons, which are expressed in the topic sentences of the body paragraphs. (The thesis is in boldface print, and the topic sentences are underlined.) Second, each of the paragraphs provide specific examples explaining the reason. The words are not vague and cannot be understood in a number of different ways. The reader knows exactly what the writer means. You may claim that the essay seems too long, but remember that your purpose is to make a convincing point that the reader can understand. Furthermore, as a college student, you will be expected to write essays that are ten or so pages long. You will need to develop your thoughts into lengthy paragraphs that make up your essay. Third, each paragraph begins with a transition word, and they are also used within the paragraph, so the reader knows how the paragraphs and sentences relate to each other. (The transition words are italicized.) Finally, the essay does not have fragments, run-ons, and comma splices. It does not have problems with subject-verb agreement, pronoun agreement and references, capitalization, and punctuation. In other words, it demonstrates strong sentence skills.

Practice Essay

To help you understand how to write an essay, follow the steps below and fill in missing information as we go along on a separate sheet of paper.

Step 1: To begin your writing, you must decide what topic you will focus on in your essay. You may be given one by your instructor or have been allowed to choose your own. If it is the former, make sure you discuss the topic you have been given, and do not change it to something else without first discussing it with your instructor. If it is latter, make sure you choose a topic that you know at least a little about and one in which you are interested.

Step 2: Now, you have to develop a tentative thesis statement. This thesis is called “tentative” because you can revise it, making it better and stronger, as you continue to work on your paper; however, you must have at least a tentative thesis to keep you as well as your essay focused.

Your thesis should clearly indicate the topic of your paper and the point you will make about it. The thesis should be broad enough to indicate the point of the entire essay yet specific enough to only indicate what you discuss. Furthermore, the length of your essay will also determine how specific it should be. If you have to write a paper on animal habitats but the essay is only five hundred words, your topic and thesis should probably only discuss one animal’s habitat. However, if your essay must be at least five pages, you should probably talk about a few animals’ habitats.

The way the directions or topic is worded may guide you to the type of thesis you should use. For example, it may require a certain mode of development, such as cause and effect, comparison and contrast, or argumentative. Or you may be able to choose your own direction for the topic. If that is the case, consider using one of the modes of

development. Perhaps the one that is used most in college is argumentative, in which you indicate your position on the subject.

With all of this information in mind, what will your tentative thesis be?

Tentative thesis:

Step 3: Once you have a thesis, you must provide support for that thesis. For instance, what reason(s) do you have for the position you are taking? (This guide will follow the standard five paragraph essay, which will require you to think of three reasons you feel the way you do.)

Reason 1:

Reason 2:

Reason 3:

Step 4: Now that we have your topic, your tentative thesis, and reasons to use to support your argument, let us develop your supporting paragraphs. You should take the three reasons that you mentioned above and explain them more thoroughly. The format below is just one example of how you can do it. The important thing to keep in mind

whether you use this format or a different one is that you must provide evidence to support your thesis as well as your topic sentences, using examples showing how you reached the position that you have mentioned in your thesis. (Keep in mind that you should develop each part of your thesis within a paragraph.)

Tentative Thesis:

I. Topic Sentence Body Paragraph 1:

A. Support 1

Explanation

B. Support 2

Explanation

C. Support 3

Explanation

II. Topic Sentence Body Paragraph 2:

A. Support 1

Explanation

B. Support 2

Explanation

C. Support 3

Explanation

III. Topic Sentence Body Paragraph 3:

A. Support 1

Explanation

B. Support 2

Explanation

C. Support 3

Explanation

After you have the thesis and supporting paragraphs for your essay, you can write your introduction and conclusion paragraphs. Follow the examples above in the section titled Essays to help you develop a strong introduction and conclusion for your essay.

Fragments

In order for a group of words to be considered a complete sentence, it must contain a subject, complete verb, and a complete or independent thought. If the group of words is missing just one of the three, it is considered a fragment. It is not based upon how short the group of words is. For instance, *I quit* is considered a sentence even though it is only two words because it has the three required components.

Complete Sentences

Casey went to Charlotte, NC, for her family reunion.

She met her great aunt, her grandmother's oldest sister, for the first time.

Casey plans to visit Charlotte again next summer, so she can spend more time getting to know her family.

Fragments

She been to the city before. *(This group of words is missing a complete verb. The word "been" needs a helping verb.)*

But did not remember it since she was two at the time. *(This group of words is missing a subject. The reader does not know who is performing the action in the sentence. Although these sentences are all related to each other referring to the same person and trip, each group of words must provide its own subject, complete verb, and complete thought.)*

When she goes back. She will take a tour of the city as well. *(The first group of words is missing a complete thought. It has a subject—she—a*

complete verb—goes—but the words cannot stand on their own as a complete thought. They need to be joined to the group of words after them in order to finish their thought.)

Helpful Tip: Some students find it easier to determine if a group of words is a sentence or fragment by reading their essays backwards. In other words, start with the last sentence and read it. Then, read the second from last sentence. Next, read the third from last sentence, and so on. By reading them backwards, the groups of words will not flow as easily, making a fragment seem as if it is correct when it is not. Another helpful trick is to read each sentence separately. For example, read the first sentence, and ask yourself does it have the three essential parts before reading the next sentence. Pausing between sentences will also prevent fragments from hiding within the flow. This will take more of your time, but the “A” that you will receive on your essay will make the extra effort worth it.

Exercise 1

Directions: Read each sentence, and decide whether it is a complete sentence or a fragment.

Sasha and Chris went on vacation to Washington, DC. After getting rest from the long bus ride. They went to see the White House. They hoping to get a glimpse of the president. Next, they went to see the Civil War Monument. They looked for the plaque with the names of the soldiers who were represented in the movie *Glory* with Denzel Washington. They also saw several museums. For example, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History, and the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. Next was the Martin Luther King Jr. Monument. The

most moving monument that they saw. The entire trip was very educational.

Correcting Fragments

To correct fragments, you basically have two options. First, you can join the group of words to the sentence before or after it. Second, you can give the group of words whatever it is missing. For instance, let us look at the example fragments above.

Since the first group of words is missing the helping verb, I can give it the helping verb to fix it.

She *has* been to the city before.

Since the second group of words is missing a subject, I can give it a subject to fix it.

But *she* did not remember it since she was two at the time.

Since the first group of words in the last fragment example is missing a complete thought, I can join it to the sentence after it and add a comma to fix it.

When she goes back, she will take a tour of the city as well.

Now that you know how to correct fragments, correct the fragments that you found in Exercise 1.

Run-ons and Comma Splices

When you are writing, you have to make sure you join sentences together in the right way. Otherwise, you may have a run-on or comma splice. Some students believe that they have a run-on because a group of words is so long, but a run-on is not determined by the length. For instance, look at this group.

Although I wanted to go to the beach on Saturday to take in the sun and spend precious time with my family after being on a business trip out of town for the past month.

The group of words above is very long, but believe it or not, it is not a run-on but a fragment. A run-on occurs when you join two complete sentences together as if they are one without the proper punctuation or conjunction. On the other hand, a comma splice occurs when you join two complete sentences together with only a comma, but a comma is not strong enough by itself to do that. Run-ons and comma splices are basically the same mistake. The only difference between the two is a comma as demonstrated in the examples below.

Run-ons

Thomas wants to buy a new car his dream is a BMW.

It will remain a dream he is still an unemployed student in high school.

Comma Splices

Thomas wants to buy a new car, his dream is a BMW.

It will remain a dream, he is still an unemployed student in high school.

Helpful Tip: Comma splices are easier to identify than run-ons because you have something to look for—a comma. However, keep in mind that every comma does not signify a comma splice. A lot of times, a comma is probably used correctly. Therefore, look for the comma, but then ask yourself if you have a sentence in front of it and a separate sentence after it but no conjunction.

Exercise 2

Directions: Read each sentence and determine if it is a run-on or comma splice.

1. Mrs. Smith's pre-k class has a very interesting group of students in it.
2. Sarah loves to wear pretty dresses when she goes to school.
3. However, her dresses are not conducive to playing outside at recess she likes to play on the monkey bars.
4. Donovan does not like sitting at the table with other students, he complains that they are always looking at him.
5. Giselle is a social butterfly; no matter whom she sits next to she loves to talk to them.
6. Sydney does not play well with others she does not like to share the toys.
7. Jacob is such a sweet little boy because he always wants to help his teacher and classmates.
8. Even though Christopher struggled with reading at the beginning of the school year, he is excelling now.
9. Cody always wants help with putting puzzles together, he never tries to do them on his own.

10. Kristian loves to talk about animals, he responds to questions by making animal sounds.

Correcting Run-ons and Comma Splices

You have five options for correcting run-ons and comma splices: period, coordination, subordination, semicolon, and conjunctive adverb. Either method of correction can be used; no rule exists that says you have to use one method over another in certain situations. However, in order to keep your writing interesting, you should use a variety of these methods in your essay.

Period: Separate the run-on or comma splice into two sentences with a period.

Thomas wants to buy a new car. His dream is a BMW.

Coordination: Join the two sentences together with a comma and a coordinating conjunction, such as for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so, known as the fan boys. Each word has a meaning; therefore, it is important that you choose the word that correctly indicates the relationship between the two sentences.

For—because

And—in addition, also, too

Nor—not this one and not the other

But—in contrast

Or—one or the other

Yet—in contrast

So—as a result

Look at how one of the sentences above uses coordination to correct it.

It will remain a dream, for he is still an unemployed student in high school.

Note: Do not use two coordinating conjunctions together. For instance, sometimes students use *and yet* in their sentences: *She was late for class, and yet she still had time to complete the exam.* Only the word *yet* should be used since it accurately expresses the relationship between the two sentences that are joined together. This is how the sentence should be correctly written: *She was late for class, yet she still had time to complete the exam.*

Note: The comma goes before the coordinating conjunction, not after it.

Subordination: Join the two sentences together with a subordinating conjunction, such as *because, when, before, after, while, although, and even though*. Generally speaking, if you place the subordinating conjunction at the beginning of the two sentences, place a comma at the end of the dependent clause. On the other hand, if you place the subordinating conjunction between the two sentences, you do not use a comma. For instance, let us use the example above.

It will remain a dream because he is still an unemployed student in high school.

Or

Because he is still an unemployed student in high school, it will remain a dream.

Notice how the first sentence does not use a comma because the subordinating conjunction *because* is between the two sentences.

However, a comma is used in the second sentence because the word *because* is used at the beginning of both sentences.

Note: I flipped the order of the two sentences, which is fine, in order to use the conjunction *because* and to make sure the sentence reads correctly.

Semicolon: Join the two sentences together with only a semicolon.

Thomas wants to buy a new car; his dream is a BMW.

Note: You can only use a semicolon between two complete sentences; otherwise, you will create a fragment. (You can also use a semicolon to separate items in a series within items in a series, which will be discussed later in the section on commas with items in a series.)

Conjunctive Adverb: Join the two sentences together with a semicolon, a conjunctive adverb, and a comma.

He is still an unemployed student in high school; therefore, it will remain a dream.

Now that you know how to correct run-ons and comma splices, correct the ones you found in Exercise 2.

Subject-verb Agreement

Verbs must agree with their subjects. This rule mainly relates to present tense verbs. You only have to worry about two verbs in the past tense when you think about subject-verb agreement: was and were.

The simplest way to understand this rule is to keep in mind that third person singular subjects have verbs with a *-s* on the end of them; all other subjects do not. For example, let us consider the verbs *sing*, *dance*, and *talk*.

Sing

Type of Subject	Subject	Verb	Type of Subject	Subject	Verb
First-person singular	I	sing	First-person plural	We	sing
Second-person singular	You	sing	Second-person plural	You	sing
Third-person singular	He, she, or it	sings	Third-person plural	They	sing

Dance

Type of Subject	Subject	Verb	Type of Subject	Subject	Verb
First-person singular	I	dance	First-person plural	We	dance
Second-person singular	You	dance	Second-person plural	You	dance
Third-person singular	He, she, or it	dances	Third-person plural	They	dance

Talk

Type of Subject	Subject	Verb	Type of Subject	Subject	Verb
First-person singular	I	talk	First-person plural	We	talk
Second-person singular	You	talk	Second-person plural	You	talk
Third-person singular	He, she, or it	talks	Third-person plural	They	talk

Notice for each verb example above, only the third person singular subject has a –s on its verb. This can be demonstrated with any verb in the present tense, not just *sing*, *dance*, and *talk*.

The examples above only use pronouns for the subjects, but the same rule applies when a noun is the subject. You just have to determine what

person the noun or subject is. Look at the table below. It has both nouns and pronouns, so you can see the similarities.

Subject	First-person singular	Second-person singular	Third-person singular	First-person plural	Second-person plural	Third-person plural
Girl			X			
Boy and girl						X
School			X			
Elephant			X			
The boys						X
Sam			X			
Sam and I				X		
You		X			X	
I	X					
Freedom			X			
We				X		

If you can replace the subject of the sentence with he, she, or it, then it is considered third person singular. For instance, *girl* can be replaced with *she*, *school* can be replaced with *it*, *elephant* can be replaced with *it*, *Sam* can be replaced with *he*, and *freedom* can be replaced with *it*. Therefore, all five of these subjects would be considered third-person singular as indicated in the table and would have verbs with a -s on the end of them.

Note: *Sam and I* is the same as saying *we*. That is why a X appears in the first person plural column.

Note: *You* can be either second person singular or plural depending upon if you are referring to one person, such as one reader, or more than one person, such as more than one reader.

Note: *I* is the only first person singular subject.

Certain subjects can be tricky to identify, causing students to use the wrong verb in the sentence. Look at these examples.

One of the girls (like, likes) to put clothes on her doll while the other girls (comb, combs) their dolls hair all the time.

In this sentence, the subject is *one*, not girls, for the first verb since the subject is never a part of a prepositional phrase. The subject is *girls* for the second verb. Therefore, the answers that should be chosen based upon what we have identified as the subjects are *likes* and *comb*.

Everyone (want, wants) to win the record breaking lottery drawing.

In this sentence, the subject is *everyone*. This word is considered third-person singular, so the verb should be *wants*.

Compound subjects can be words joined together by either...or..., neither...nor..., and not only...but also.... When two subjects are joined together by one of these constructions, the verb must agree with the subject to which it is closer.

Neither the students nor the teacher wants to return to school from summer break.

Neither the teacher nor the students want to return to school from summer break.

Notice how the verb changes from *wants* to *want* when the subjects exchange positions. In the first sentence, *teacher*, which is singular, is closer to the verb, so the verb is *wants*. In the second sentence, *students*, which is plural, is closer to the verb, so the verb is *want*.

Exercise 3

Directions: Choose the verb that agrees with the subject of the sentence.

1. Carey (want, wants) to get a new job with better benefits.
2. Zoe and Chloe (walk, walks) to the corner store every day to buy their favorite snack.
3. They (was, were) going to go to the party but decided to go to the movies instead.
4. The school (is, are) being remodeled for the new school year.
5. The dog (bark, barks) at everyone who walks by the gate.
6. Clarissa and I (wish, wishes) we could go on a cruise for our honeymoon.
7. You (have, has) to see the newest action movie that just came out on Friday.
8. Michael (study, studies) every weekend to keep his grades up.
9. I (need, needs) to start studying but (have, has) to take a nap first.
10. Donna (dance, dances) to stay in shape.

Pronoun

Pronouns take the place of nouns, which are called the pronouns' antecedents. For example,

Camille gives her daughter a kiss and says, "I love you," every day before the little girl goes to school.

In this sentence, *her* is the pronoun, and its antecedent is *Camille*.

When you use a pronoun, it must agree in number and person with its antecedent, it must clearly refer to its antecedent and not be ambiguous, and it must be consistent. Also, when you use a pronoun, you must use the correct case for the sentence.

Agreement

The pronoun must agree in number with its antecedent. If the noun that is being replaced is singular, the pronoun must be singular; if the noun is plural, the pronoun must be plural.

John bought his wife flowers for Valentine's Day.

He also purchased her a new wedding band since this holiday is also their wedding anniversary.

John is singular, so are the pronouns *his* and *he*.

Wife is singular, so is the pronoun *her*.

John and *wife* are plural when used together, so is the pronoun *their*.

Some tricky antecedents are indefinite pronouns and collective nouns.

Indefinite pronouns are words that do not refer to any definite person or thing. Most of them, with the exception of the words *all* and *both*, are considered singular and must use singular pronouns. Some examples of indefinite pronouns are *one, everyone, someone, everybody, somebody, anyone,* and *anybody*. Unless the context of the sentence indicates whether the person being referred to is male or female, you should use *he or she, him or her* as the pronoun that refers back to the indefinite pronoun.

Everyone will bring his or her books to class on Tuesday.

One of the boys left his toy truck in the driveway.

Collective nouns are words that refer to a group of people who make up one unit, and they are considered singular when they work together as one unit and the collective noun is a singular, not plural, word. Some examples of collective nouns are *family, team, college, group,* and *jury*. Pronouns that refer back to them must be singular.

The team was excited about its latest victory.

The family decided it would have its family reunion in Charlotte, NC, this year.

The jury reached its decision in less than an hour.

Reference and Ambiguity

The pronoun must clearly refer to the antecedent and not be ambiguous. You cannot use a pronoun if it will not be clear to whom or what you are referring.

It said we could not swim at the beach.

They will start accepting applications on Tuesday.

Although the reader can guess what *it* and *they* are referring to, you should make sure the reader knows exactly who or what the antecedents are.

Tom and James took his boat to the Detroit River last Sunday.

Lia and Cassidy will bring her bicycle to the park for the picnic.

In both sentences, the pronouns *his* and *her* respectively can be referring to either person in the sentence. Once again, the reader must know to whom or what you are referring.

Consistency

When you use a pronoun, you cannot switch person. In other words, you cannot change from third person to second person, for example, when you are referring to the same person.

I came to college so that you can improve your life.

Nyla always give your best to everything with which you are confronted.

In the first sentence, the writer switches from first-person *I* to second-person *you* and *your*. In the second sentence, the writer changes from third-person *Nyla* to second-person *your* and *you*.

Pronoun Case

Only subject pronouns can act as the subject of a sentence, and only object pronouns can be objects in a sentence. In other words, looking at the first person singular subject and object pronouns below, *me* cannot take the place of *I* in a sentence and neither can *I* take the place of *me*.

	Subject	Object		Subject	Object
First-person singular	I	me	First-person plural	we	us
Second-person singular	you	you	Second-person plural	you	you
Third-person singular	he, she, it	him, her, it	Third-person plural	they	them

Incorrect

Me and Tim are going to the party at Erica's house on Friday

Correct

Tim and I are going to the party at Erica's house on Friday.

Note: Although *me* and *I* changed positions between the two sentences, that has nothing to do with the point that the pronouns are not interchangeable.

When you have compound subjects or objects in a sentence, the best way to determine which pronoun is right is to ignore the other subject or object and concentrate on the pronoun. Try both the subject and object forms of the pronoun, and whichever one sounds right is right.

Which one of these sounds correct? Ignore the words *Tim* and *and* and say the sentence using *me* and then *I*.

Me am going to the party at Erica's house on Friday.

OR

I am going to the party at Erica's house on Friday.

Hopefully, you said the second one, which is correct, because that pronoun sounds better in the sentence.

When it comes to comparisons, which use the words *than* or *as*, you have to finish the thought that is implied and not stated. Then decide which one sounds right. For instance, read the follow two sentences.

Sean is taller than I.

Sean is taller than me.

In these sentences, if you finish the thought that is implied and not stated, you are actually saying *Sean is taller than I am* or *Sean is taller than me am*. When you compare the two, the first one sounds right, so it is right. Try these two.

My parents pay more attention to my sister than I.

My parents pay more attention to my sister than me.

In these sentences, if you finish the thought that is implied and not stated, you are actually saying *My parents pay more attention to my sister than they pay attention to I* or *My parents pay more attention to*

my sister than they pay attention to me. When you compare the two, the second one sounds right, so it is right.

Exercise 4

Directions: Choose the correct pronoun for each sentence.

1. Tonya wants to complete (her, their) associate's degree.
2. The college will offer (its, their) students scholarships for the upcoming school year.
3. (They, The advisors) will hold conferences with students every day from noon until 5:00 p.m.
4. I will have to decide if (my, your) education is worth all of the sacrifices that I will have to make.
5. My mother took my brother and (I, me) to the movies.
6. Wanda and (she, her) will be leaving for their vacation tomorrow.
7. Ron likes to play basketball as much as (I, me).
8. Studying will benefit her just as much as (I, me).
9. Charlene and Laura could not tell if (Laura's, her) car window was down or up in the pouring rain.
10. Everybody will have to bring (his or her, their) gym bag to school tomorrow.

Comma

Commas are used basically in six situations: after introductory elements, around nonessential interrupters, between items in a series, before a coordinating conjunction, with quotation marks, and with everyday material. If one of these reasons do not apply for your sentence, you probably do not need one. The saying goes "When in doubt, leave it out."

Comma with Introductory Elements

Add a comma after an introductory element in a sentence.

When Carmen stays up late, she is unable to get up the next morning.

Because we want to go to Walt Disney World next year, we will start saving our money.

While Sharon was packing to move out of her house, she found old family pictures.

Commas with Nonessential Interrupters

Commas should be used when information that interrupt the flow of the sentence is not important in helping the reader understand the meaning of the sentence. In other words, the meaning will be the same even without the interrupting phrase. However, the writer should not use commas if the meaning will become unclear.

Nonessential Information—Commas Needed

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who delivered the famous "I Have a Dream" speech, was a major leader in the Civil Rights Movement.

Coretta Scott King, who was his wife, was a symbol of strength and grace after the assassination of her husband.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. monument, which officially opened in 2011, reminds us of his struggle for equality for all human beings.

Essential Information—Commas Not Needed

The waiter who works the evening shift will be off for six weeks because he has to have surgery on his wrist.

The neighbor that just moved in last week brought us homemade cookies today.

The little boy that plays with Tommy asked if he can come over for a sleepover one day.

Note: With the first set of sentences that use commas, if you remove the words within the commas, the meaning would still be clear. The reader will still know to whom the writer is referring. However, with the second set of sentences, if you remove the words *who works the evening shift*, for example, the reader would not know exactly which waiter to whom the writer is referring. Also, it is a rule that you cannot use a comma before the word *that*, but you should use a comma before the word *which*.

Commas between Items in a Series

Place commas between items that are a part of a list in a sentence.

Casey, Rachel, and I are best friends.

After I left work, went to the store, and cooked dinner, I was able to meet Casey and Rachel at the mall.

They helped me to pick out a sweater, pants, and shoes to wear for my date on Friday.

Note: From time to time, you may have items in a series within items in a series. When that is the case, you must use semicolons to separate the primary items in a series from the secondary items in a series.

We love to eat French fries with bacon, cheese, and chives; bar-b-cue ribs; and ice cream with whipped cream, nuts, and a cherry on top.

Comma before Coordinating Conjunctions

Place a comma between two complete sentences joined by *and*, *but*, *for*, *or*, *nor*, *so*, or *yet*. (See the section on run-ons and comma splices for more information about the use of commas with coordinating conjunctions.)

I want to go to bed, but I have so much work to do.

Lynda has her master's degree, yet she wants to go back to school to get her doctorate.

Francine has to get up early, for she has to follow a detour due to the freeway closure.

Comma with Quotation Marks

Separate direct quotes from other parts of a sentence with a comma.

“I would like to go with you,” Christie explained, “but I already promised Tom that I would go to prom with him.”

“Laura can help you with your homework,” Mom said.

Walter yelled, “Watch out for that car!”

Commas with Everyday Material

Use a comma with direct address, addresses, as well as numbers and dates.

Direct Address

Jason, will you come here please?

You can have this slice of cake, Andrew.

Addresses

I live at 259 East Oak Drive, Cleveland, Ohio 44105.

Andrea moved to 7498 Freeland, Detroit, Michigan, about a month ago.

Note: If you do not include the zip code with the city and state, then you must follow the state with a comma.

Numbers and Dates

7,897

100, 205

5,768,439

December 25, 2016

February 14, 2011

July 4, 1776

Note: When you include a date within a sentence, you must follow the year with a comma.

We will celebrate Christmas on December 25, 2016, this year.

Exercise 5

Directions: Add commas where they are needed in each sentence.

1. After I left work I went home to relax from the stress of the day.
2. My daughter who just turned seven yesterday is starting to talk about her eighth birthday party.
3. When I went to the store I purchased steak potatoes asparagus rolls cheesecake and a bottle of wine to fix a special dinner for our tenth anniversary.
4. I have lived at 23945 Swanson Detroit MI for five years now.
5. "When I finish reading the book" Mary said "I will go see the movie."
6. For their first date Jennifer and Sam met at the restaurant and then they took a walk through the park.
7. Joseph will you please go with me to the basement to get a heavy box?
8. While their son was at football practice Elizabeth made a few phone calls and Steve worked on his report for work.
9. "Let's meet at the Riverwalk" Andre stated. "Then we will walk over to Hart Plaza for the festival."
10. Doug a football enthusiast has been to every Super Bowl game for the past twenty years.

Apostrophe

In academic writing, you should only use an apostrophe to show possession. It is not used to make a word plural or at the end of a verb. The apostrophe is before the *-s* when the noun is singular or when it is plural but does not end with *-s*, such as *women's* and *children's*. It goes after the *-s* when the noun is plural and ends with a *-s*, for example, *girls'*, *boys'*, and *classes'*.

Correct

Addison's bike was left in the rain last night.

The boy's toy truck is inside the toy chest.

The students' book bags were placed in the hall while they played outside.

The women's restroom is closed while the janitor cleans it.

Incorrect

The girl's are in the kitchen with their grandmother making cookies.

The car run's out of gas since the gauge is broken.

Exercise 6

Directions: Add apostrophes where they belong in each sentence. Three of the sentences are correct.

1. Carlas dress was damaged at the cleaners.

2. Christina wants to buy the new Barbie dream house with the money she received in her birthday cards.
3. The childrens toys were scattered all over the floor.
4. The doctors office was very crowded, for she was an hour behind in her appointments.
5. My two sons gym clothes made the entire house stink.
6. The boys are playing in their treehouse in the backyard.
7. The zoo animals food was frozen in ice to help them cope with the hot weather.
8. Dions purse was left in the grocery basket.
9. The second grade class is going on a field trip to the Detroit Science Center.
10. Will you please bring Sonyas iPad with you, so she can play with it in the car?

Other Important Tips

Avoid Contractions

Contractions occur when you combine two words into one with the help of an apostrophe.

I + am =I'm

Do + not=don't

Will + not=won't

Contractions are considered informal writing, which is not appropriate for formal writing that is required in college courses.

Avoid Second Person

Second person is considered the pronouns *you* and *your*. These words address the reader directly, which you should not do in formal writing unless you are writing a process paragraph or essay.

Avoid I Feel/Think/Believe

You do not need to include the expressions *I feel*, *I think*, or *I believe* in your essay. Since it is your essay, it is understood that the ideas in your essay are your feelings, thoughts, and beliefs.

Avoid There is/There are/There was/There were

The expressions *there is*, *there are*, *there was*, and *there were* are wordy and cause a sentence not to have as much power behind it. Compare these two examples.

Incorrect

There is a house on fire down the street.

There are a lot of rules in English.

Correct

A house is on fire down the street.

English has a lot of rules.

Be Concise

If you can use two words instead of five to express an idea, you should use the former. Being wordy can be confusing to your reader, and it is often better to get to the point as quickly as possible.

Wordy

Due to the fact that she missed the bus, she was late to work.

In today's day and age, young people must become more politically active.

Concise

Because she missed the bus, she was late to work.

Today, young people must become more politically active.

Answer Key

Fragments

Exercise 1

The fragments are in italics.

Sasha and Chris went on vacation to Washington, DC. *After getting rest from the long bus ride.* They went to see the White House. *They hoping to get a glimpse of the president.* Next, they went to see the Civil War Monument. They looked for the plaque with the names of the soldiers who were represented in the movie *Glory* with Denzel Washington. They also saw several museums. *For example, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History, and the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum.* Next was the Martin Luther King Jr. Monument. *The most moving monument that they saw.* The entire trip was very educational.

The corrected fragments are in boldface print.

Sasha and Chris went on vacation to Washington, DC. **After getting rest from the long bus ride, they went to see the White House. They were hoping to get a glimpse of the president.** Next, they went to see the Civil War Monument. They looked for the plaque with the names of the soldiers who were represented in the movie *Glory* with Denzel Washington. **They also saw several museums, for example, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History, and the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum.** Next was the Martin

Luther King Jr. Monument, the most moving monument that they saw. The entire trip was very educational.

Run-ons and Comma Splices

Exercise 2

The run-ons are italicized and the comma splices are underlined. The sentences that are correct have the word **Correct** after them.

1. Mrs. Smith's pre-k class has very interesting group of students in it.
Correct
2. Sarah loves to where pretty dresses when she goes to school.
Correct
3. *However, her dresses are not conducive to playing outside at recess she likes to play on the monkey bars.*
4. Donovan does not like sitting at the table with other students, he complains that they are always looking at him.
5. Giselle is a social butterfly; no matter whom she sits next to she loves to talk to them. **Correct**
6. *Sydney does not play well with others she does not like to share the toys.*
7. Jacob is such a sweet little boy because he always wants to help his teacher and classmates. **Correct**
8. Even though Christopher struggled with reading at the beginning of the school year, he is excelling now. **Correct**
9. Cody always wants help with putting puzzles together, he never tries to do them on his own.
10. Kristian loves to talk about animals, he responds to questions by making animal sounds.

Below are examples of how the run-ons and comma splices can be corrected. They can be corrected in other ways.

1. Mrs. Smith's pre-k class has very interesting group of students in it.
2. Sarah loves to where pretty dresses when she goes to school.
3. However, her dresses are not conducive to playing outside at recess because she likes to play on the monkey bars.
4. Donovan does not like sitting at the table with other students. He complains that they are always looking at him.
5. Giselle is a social butterfly; no matter whom she sits next to she loves to talk to them.
6. Sydney does not play well with others; she does not like to share the toys.
7. Jacob is such a sweet little boy because he always wants to help his teacher and classmates.
8. Even though Christopher struggled with reading at the beginning of the school year, he is excelling now.
9. Cody always wants help with putting puzzles together; therefore, he never tries to do them on his own.
10. Kristian loves to talk about animals, and he responds to questions by making animal sounds.

Subject-verb Agreement

Exercise 3

The answers are underlined in each sentence.

1. Carey (want, wants) to get a new job with better benefits.
2. Zoe and Chloe (walk, walks) to the corner store every day to buy their favorite snack.

3. They (was, were) going to go to the party but decided to go to the movies instead.
4. The school (is, are) being remolded for the new school year.
5. The dog (bark, barks) at everyone who walks by the gate.
6. Clarissa and I (wish, wishes) we could go on a cruise for our honeymoon.
7. You (have, has) to see the newest action movie that just came out on Friday.
8. Michael (study, studies) every weekend to keep his grades up.
9. I (need, needs) to start studying but (have, has) to take a nap first.
10. Donna (dance, dances) to stay in shape.

Pronouns

Exercise 4

The answers are underlined.

1. Tonya wants to complete (her, their) associate's degree.
2. The college will offer (its, their) students scholarships for the upcoming school year.
3. (They, The advisors) will hold conferences with students every day from noon until 5:00 p.m.
4. I will have to decide if (my, your) education is worth all of the sacrifices that I will have to make.
5. My mother took my brother and (I, me) to the movies.
6. Wanda and (she, her) will be leaving for their vacation tomorrow.
7. Ron likes to play basketball as much as (I, me).
8. Studying will benefit her just as much as (I, me).
9. Charlene and Laura could not tell if (Laura's, her) car window was down or up in the pouring rain.

10. Everybody will have to bring (his or her, their) gym bag to school tomorrow.

Comma

Exercise 5

Commas have been added to the sentences where they are needed.

1. After I left work, I went home to relax from the stress of the day.
2. My daughter, who just turned seven yesterday, is starting to talk about her eighth birthday party.
3. When I went to the store, I purchased steak, potatoes, asparagus, rolls, cheesecake, and a bottle of wine to fix a special dinner for our tenth anniversary.
4. I have lived at 23945 Swanson, Detroit, MI, for five years now.
5. "When I finish reading the book," Mary said, "I will go see the movie."
6. For their first date, Jennifer and Sam met at the restaurant, and then they took a walk through the park.
7. Joseph, will you please go with me to the basement to get a heavy box?
8. While their son was at football practice, Elizabeth made a few phone calls, and Steve worked on his report for work.
9. "Let's meet at the Riverwalk," Andre stated. "Then we will walk over to Hart Plaza for the festival."
10. Doug, a football enthusiast, has been to every Super Bowl game for the past twenty years.

Apostrophe

Exercise 6

Apostrophes have been added to the sentences where they are needed. The sentences that do not need apostrophes have the word **Correct** after them.

1. Carla's dress was damaged at the cleaners.
2. Christina wants to buy the new Barbie dream house with the money she received in her birthday cards. **Correct**
3. The children's toys were scattered all over the floor.
4. The doctor's office was very crowded, for she was an hour behind in her appointments.
5. My two sons' gym clothes made the entire house stink.
6. The boys are playing in their treehouse in the backyard. **Correct**
7. The zoo animals' food was frozen in ice to help them cope with the hot weather.
8. Dion's purse was left in the grocery basket.
9. The second grade class is going on a field trip to the Science Center. **Correct**
10. Will you please bring Sonya's iPad with you, so she can play with it in the car?

Additional Resources

This is just a brief guide that focuses on common mistakes in writing and grammar. To learn about other grammar rules, you can consult a more detailed grammar handbook. Below are a few examples.

Maimon, Elaine P., Janice H. Peritz, and Kathleen Blake Yancey. *The New McGraw-Hill Handbook*. Third Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2016. Print.

Maimon, Elaine P., Janice H. Peritz, and Kathleen Blake Yancey. *The Brief McGraw-Hill Handbook*. Second Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2016. Print.

Raimes, Ann and Maria Jerskey. *Universal Keys for Writers*. Second Edition. New York: Cengage, 2008. Print.

Work Cited

Langan, John. *English Skills with Readings*. Eighth Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012. Print.