



You're sitting down at your desk with your red pen at the ready. The heavens have parted, and the editing gods are bestowing bright beams of concentration to your work at hand. But where to begin? Whether you're new to editing or a seasoned pro, you can always use a helpful reminder on the basics of grammatical and syntactical no-nos. Consider this your trusty checklist! Your Virgil, guiding you through the inner circles of your editing projects.

Wrong Word

[affect/effect, lay/lie, sit/set, who/whom, toward/towards](#), etc.

Vague Pronoun Reference

Confusing: Bob annoyed Larry, but that didn't stop **him** from asking for a meeting.

Clear: Bob annoyed Larry, but that didn't stop Larry from asking for a meeting.

Lack of Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

Frequently Disparaged: Everyone withdrew their money.

Uncontroversial: Everyone withdrew his or her money.

Uncontroversial: People withdrew their money.

Missing or Unnecessary Capitalization

Capitalize proper nouns: Capitalize the names of things, such as "the Golden Gate Bridge."

Lowercase common nouns: Lowercase descriptions, such as "that famous bridge."

Unnecessary Shift in Verb Tense

Wrong: John Wilkes Booth barricaded the door while Lincoln is watching the play.

Right: John Wilkes Booth barricaded the door while Lincoln watched the play.

Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments aren't always wrong, but don't use them accidentally.

Fragments: Because she was late. And I held the door.

Monotonous Sentence Structure

Monotonous: We were late. I called the office. Bob answered the phone. Bob told Sue. Sue stalled the investors.

Better: I called the office because we were late. Bob answered the phone and told Sue, who stalled the investors.



Adjective Drift

Confusing: The property has seasonal creeks and trail access.

Clear: The property has trail access and seasonal creeks.'

Unnecessary Adverbs and Prepositions

Bloated: I was very angry that Bob sat down on the wet paint.

Better: I was furious that Bob sat on the wet paint.

Parallelism Errors

Not Parallel: Kids like singing, chatting, and check their phones.

Parallel: Kids like singing, chatting, and checking their phones.

Passive Voice

Passive voice isn't wrong, but active sentences are often better.

Passive: The bell was rung by zombies.

Active: Zombies rang the bell.

"There Are" Sentences

You can often improve sentences that start with "There are."

Not great: There are usually 54 cards in a deck.

Better: A deck usually has 54 cards.

Jargon

Jargon: You can often improve on expletive sentences.

More Accessible: You can often improve on sentences that start with "There are."

Missing Comma After Introductory Element

Wrong: In the past we bought vinyl records.

Right: In the past, we bought vinyl records.

Unnecessary Comma

Wrong: Bob likes pandas, and visits the zoo often.

Right: Bob likes pandas and visits the zoo often.

Comma Splice

Wrong: I ate cake, I played games.

Right: I ate cake, and I played games.

Right: I ate cake and played games.

Run-On Sentences

Wrong: I ate cake I played games.

Right: I ate cake, and I played games.

Right: I ate cake and played games.

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Missing Comma in a Compound Sentence

Wrong: All my friends came over for my birthday Tuesday and Bobby visited me the next day.

Right: All my friends came over for my birthday Tuesday, and Bobby visited me the next day.

Missing Comma with a Nonrestrictive Element

Wrong: Shoes which are worn on your feet come in many styles.

Right: Shoes, which are worn on your feet, come in many styles.

Mechanical Problems with Quotations

In the U.S., periods and commas go inside the closing quotation mark. Semicolons, colons, and dashes go outside the closing quotation mark. The position of question marks and exclamation points varies: They stay with their question or exclamation.

Correct:

She yelled, "Help!"

I won a copy of "Wrecking Ball"!

She asked, "Are you hungry?"

Did he just say, "We in Hungary"?

Quotation Marks for Emphasis

Wrong: "Free" soda on Saturdays.

Right: Free soda on Saturdays.

Apostrophe Errors

Nouns take apostrophes to become possessive. Pronouns don't. "It's" means "it is" or "it has." "Its" is the possessive form of "it." Acronyms, initialisms, and years don't take apostrophes to become plural (CDs, 1980s).

Unnecessary or Missing Hyphen

Don't hyphenate phrasal verbs.

Wrong: Log-in to your account.

Right: Log in to your account.

Do hyphenate compound adjectives. These mean different things: "small car salesman" and "small-car salesman."

Spelling Errors

Remember to run a spellcheck. It's obvious but easy to forget.

Search for these words and phrases to do a quick check:

"there are," "it is," "its," "it's," "your," "you're," "their," and "they're."



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