Proofreading

Proofreading is the final stage of the writing process. All writers are prone to error, so setting time aside late in the process to check for sentence-level errors, grammar errors, and mechanical errors is a good strategy. This handout reviews how to diagnose and repair some common mistakes.

A. Sentence Fragments and Independent Clauses

The **fragment** is a group of words lacking either a subject or a verb (or sometimes both) that masquerades as a regular sentence.

1. **the –ing fragment** (–ing verbs cannot stand alone as main verbs):
   - (x) The girl running down the street.
   - (√) The girl is running down the street.
   - (√) Dakota is the girl running down the street.

2. **the who/which fragment** (who and which cannot stand alone as subjects in declarative sentences):
   - (x) I saw the man. Who reminded me of my uncle.
   - (√) I saw the man who reminded me of my uncle.

3. **the because fragment** (because causes the second clause to be dependent, and thus not a sentence):
   - (x) I went home. Because I felt sick.
   - (√) I went home because I felt sick.
   The fragment above also can be repaired by removing the word because:
   - (√) I went home. I felt sick.
   Several other options exist. Replace the period with a **semicolon**:
   - (√) I went home; I felt sick.
   Replace the period with a **comma and a coordinating conjunction**:
   - (√) I went home, for I felt sick.
   **Subordinate** one of the clauses:
   - (√) Since I felt sick, I went home.
   Replace the period with a **semicolon, conjunctive adverb, and a comma**:
   - (√) I felt sick; consequently, I went home.

B. Subject-Verb Agreement

If a subject is singular, then the verb form must be singular. If the subject is plural, then verb form must be plural. The rules are termed **agreement**. It is a peculiarity of English that we add an *s* to a verb with a third person singular subject.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular forms</th>
<th>Plural forms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I grow</td>
<td>We grow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You grow</td>
<td>You grow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The girl grows</td>
<td>The girls grow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The flower in the yard grows</td>
<td>The lilies in the garden grow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety grows</td>
<td>Anxieties grow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Special agreement situations

1. **The correlatives**: in *either/or* and *neither/nor* constructions, the verb takes the number of the subject nearer to it.
   - *Either John or the children are coming to the party.*
   - *Either the children or John is making the cookies.*

2. **Elements** (like prepositional phrases) that come between the subject and the verb do not change the number of either.
   - *The fact that he lost the five races upsets no one.*
   - *A collection of rare oil paintings is part of the exhibit.*
   - *The chairman, along with the delegation members, sits at the head table.*

3. **Use a singular verb with an indefinite pronoun** (e.g., *each*, *anybody*, *everybody*, *someone*):
   - *Each of the campers takes a survival skills test.*
   - *Everybody eats a little too much fatty food.*

4. **The use of there** to begin a sentence reverses the order from *subject-verb* to *verb-subject*.
   - *There are five new laws under review.*
   - *There is a reason the governor would not consider tax increases.*

C. **Pronouns**

A *pronoun* is a word that substitutes for a noun, or sometimes another pronoun. There are many types of pronouns: **personal** (*he, she, it, we, you, they*), **relative** (*who, which*), **indefinite** (*everyone, anybody*).

1. Many personal and relative pronouns come in pairs, like *she/her, he/him*, and *who/whom*.
   - Which member of the pair to use depends on how the pronoun functions in the sentence.
   - *She, he, and who* are used as *subjects* of verbs and as complements (predicate nominative):
     - *She ran the race.*
     - *The man watching the race is he.*
     - *No one knows who will win the race next week.*
   - *Her, him, and whom* are used as *objects*, especially of verbs and prepositions:
     - *The marshal awarded her the trophy.*
     - *Give the second-place trophy to him.*
     - *We're not sure whom the marshal disqualified."

The selection of *who* vs. *whom* will not present difficulties if you

1. work with only the dependent clause in which *who/whom* appears;
2. rearrange the words in this clause into standard subject-verb word order; and
3. substitute *he* and *him* for *who* or *whom* to determine the correct choice.

Applied to “We're not sure whom the marshal disqualified” yields the following:

1. Isolate dependent clause "who/whom the marshal disqualified";
2. rearrange words "The marshal disqualified who/whom"; and
3. substitute *he/him*: “The marshal disqualified he” is obviously wrong;
4. the correct choice is “The marshal disqualified him”; so...
5. the object form is the correct selection: "whom the marshal disqualified."

D. **Modifiers**

1. **Misplaced modifiers.** A misplaced modifier is a group of words that is in the wrong place in a sentence. Modifiers should be near the words or phrases they modify. Correcting a misplaced modifier involves identifying and moving it.
   
   (x) *Tony bought a car from an old lady without an engine.*
   
   a. Identify the misplaced modifier: *without an engine.*
   b. As written, the sentence means that the old lady had no engine!
c. Move the misplaced modifier alongside the word (or phrase) that it modifies. The writer means to say that the car lacked an engine:

(✓) Tony bought a car without an engine from an old lady.

2. Dangling modifiers. A dangling modifier is a group of words that does not explicitly modify anything else in the sentence; thus, it "dangles." Very often, the dangling modifier comes at the beginning of the sentence, in this pattern:

- ing or -ed word + comma + subject

(x) Studying for hours, the GRE challenges even the brightest students.

The –ing word should modify the word or phrase right after the comma; here, it does not, since the exam does not study. Unlike the misplaced modifier, the dangling modifier cannot simply be relocated: "GRE exam, studying for hours, challenges even the brightest test-takers" is no improvement. The sentence needs some rehabilitation.

(✓) Even after studying for hours, John, a very bright student, found the GRE challenging.

(✓) The GRE challenges even the brightest students, many of whom prepare for hours.

1. CAPITALIZATION

1. Please, Mother, hand me the application form. My mother is Princeton graduate.
2. My hardest class this summer is Calculus 1013. My calculus test was difficult.
3. I speak English and French in my history and sociology courses.
4. Let’s go to Mexico in the spring.

2. APOSTROPHES

1. Who’s in karate class with Alan? Whose history paper was found in the cafeteria?
2. It’s time to write our first drafts. The Web site is having problems with its security system.
3. One’s critical documents should be backed up on other media. Ours are.
4. The university’s academic honesty rules should be the same as my professors’ rules.

3. VERB CHOICES

1. I sit here. (no action) I set the book down. (action)
2. I lie here. (no action, present tense) I lay the book down. (action, past tense)
3. The temperature rises. (no object) He raises chickens. (object)
4. I would have gone. (correct) I would of gone. (incorrect)
5. Speakers and writers imply. Listeners and readers infer.

4. WORD CHOICES

1. The argument is between two students. The argument is among four sorority sisters.
2. The principal (main) thing to remember is that the principal of the school upholds the principles (rules).
3. I have less time than ever. There seem to be fewer hours available for sleep.
4. Rain affects (verb) the soil. The effect (noun) is usually muddiness.
5. The writer cited (quoted) the site (place) as a beautiful sight (vision).
6. “He played real good" in informal speech becomes "He played really well" in writing.
7. “Joe is as stingy as they” [are stingy], not “Joe is as stingy as them.” “Sue is smarter than I” [am smart], not “Sue is smarter than me.