

Essay Writing: Grammar & Mechanics

NOTE! These are only *general* suggestions. For more help in these areas, use the sites linked to my webpage.

ACTIVE VOICE v PASSIVE VOICE

- › Remember to choose a tense that adds life to your writing; avoid passive voice
- › In active voice, the subject performs the action
 - The car squished the squirrel. (S-V-O order)
- › In passive voice, the subject receives the action
 - The squirrel was squished by the car. (O-V-S order)
 - The squirrel got squished. (O-V order, subject is missing)

COMMAS *(for more assistance, see <http://www.jprof.com/writing/rulesforusingcommas.html>)*

1. Use a comma to separate the elements in a series (three or more things), including the last two.
Ex: He hit the ball, dropped the bat, and ran to first base.
2. Use a comma + a little conjunction (and, but, for, nor, yet, or, so) to connect two independent clauses
Ex: He hit the ball well, but he ran toward third base.
3. Use a comma to set off introductory elements – follow the “rule of three”
Ex: Running toward third base, he suddenly realized how stupid he looked
4. When a sentence begins with an adverbial clause, put a comma after it.
Ex: As the day drew to a smoky end, the firefighters put out the last of the embers.
EX: Before I ate dinner, I washed my hands.
5. Use a comma to set off parenthetical elements (part of the sentence that can be omitted without changing the meaning of the sentence) or non-essential clauses.
Ex: The Sox game, which began at 7:00pm, lasted three hours.
Ex: Eleanor, his wife of 30 years, suddenly decided to open her own business.
6. An appositive (the re-naming of a word that immediately proceeds follows it) is always treated as a parenthetical phrase
Ex: The best exercise, walking briskly, is also the least expensive.
Ex: My favorite teacher, a fine chess player in her own right, has won several state-level tournaments.
7. Use a comma to separate coordinate adjectives
Ex: That tall, distinguished, good looking fellow is my dad.
8. Use a comma to set off quoted elements
Ex: Janet said, “Can you babysit Friday night?”
9. Typographical Reasons
 - a. Between a city and state – Denver, Colorado
 - b. Between a date and a year – January 7, 1985
 - c. In long numbers – 5,435,762

LEAN AND MEAN (BREVITY)

- › Like Weasel Words, modifiers, connectors, prepositional phrases, and phrases can add unnecessary words to your paper. Trim extra words and tighten your writing.
- › Modifiers

- When an adjective / adverb does nothing by repeat what the noun or verb says, cut it.
 - Current status → status
 - Smiled happily → smiled
- › Connectors
 - Remove connectors such as *that* or *who* if you can.
 - The person *who* is teaching this lesson is nuts.
 - The person teaching this lesson is nuts.
- › Prepositional phrases
 - Limit the number of prepositional phrases in your sentences. Cut “of” phrases when possible.
 - We need grammar skills *within the scope of this class* to improve.
 - We need to improve grammar skills in this class.
- › Phrases
 - Choose one or two word phrases in lieu of longer, wordier phrases.
 - For the reason that → because
 - In the majority of instances → usually
 - At some point in the near future → soon

PARALLEL CONSTRUCTION

- › Ideas in a sentence that share the same role should be constructed in the same way
 - My English teacher is a psychopath because *she likes grammar, she enjoys books, and she loves talking about Weasel Words*. Notice the first two items are three-word descriptors while the last is six words encompassing a broader descriptor.
 - My English teacher is crazy because *she likes teaching grammar to students, she enjoys reading books to dogs, and she loves hunting Weasel Words for journalists*.
- › Faulty parallelism is easy to fix.
 - The paper was *informative* and a *surprise*.
 - The paper was *informative* and *surprising*.

“PET PEEVES”

- › “based off” is really *based on*
- › “try and” is really *try to*

PRONOUN- ANTECEDENT AGREEMENT

- › By far this is the biggest grammatical problem for all writers
- › Pronouns should be used sparingly when writing about several characters of the same sex
- › Always check to guarantee your antecedent agrees with the pronouns used in the sentence
 - “While at Delphi, Apollo told Oedipus he was going to kill his father and marry his mother.”
 - Apollo’s killing his own dad?
 - Apollo’s killing Oedipus’ dad?
 - Apollo’s killing Oedipus’ dad and Oedipus is marrying his own mom?
 - Apollo’s is marrying mom and Oedipus is killing dad?
 - The antecedent (Apollo) does not agree with the pronoun (he) used to refer to the direct objects (mother and father).
 - “Everyone has a flaw which may or may not bring about their own demise.”
 - everyone is singular; they is plural – although informal conversation allows for this discrepancy, formal writing is unforgiving on the issue!

SENTENCE STRUCTURE / DEPENDENT CLAUSES

- › Run on sentences and sentence fragments are unacceptable – you are responsible for knowing what a sentence is and how to use one properly
- › Vary your sentence structure to add interest and range to your writing
- › Use dependent clauses *sparingly!* Dependent clauses can make your writing clunky and wordy.
 - *Because my English teacher is an evil grammarian, we have to practice grammar skills today.* Instead say: We have to practice grammar skills today because...
 - *The assignment that was developed by my evil English teacher was difficult.* Instead say: My English teacher's lesson was difficult.

SPELLING

- › Silly mistakes can be avoided with proper, thorough proofreading
- › Always double check spellings of names (including author names in parenthetical notation!)

THAT / WHICH / WHO

- › *Who* should be used with people or items with which you want to associate person qualities (ex: pet)
 - Our class has a pet mouse *who* likes to nibble on our books at night.
- › *That* should be used to introduce essential clauses and do not use a comma
 - The paper *that everyone thought Ms. Wagner would forget to grade* was hard to revise.
- › *Which* should be used to introduce non-essential clauses and use a comma
 - This grammar review, *which is totally nit-picky*, serves to remind us to use grammar skills.

WHO / WHOM

- › Use *who* whenever the pronoun is the subject of a verb
 - *Who* is going to actually read this whole handout? (*Who* is the subject of *is*.)
- › Use *whom* when the pronoun immediately follows a preposition or a verb
 - Ask *whomever* you like for help on this confusing subject.

VERB TENSE AGREEMENT

- › Typically you should write in present tense (unless referring to something that happened in the character's past)
- › Many writers confuse/ interchange several tenses throughout their papers – don't do that!
 - present tense → I go, we go
 - past tense → I went, we went
 - future tense → I will go, we will go
 - present perfect → I have gone, we have gone
 - past perfect → I had gone, we had gone

“WEASEL WORDS”

- › Avoid empty, meaningless words that can clutter your writing without adding meaning (that)
 - I know ~~that~~ I like cookies. I hope ~~that~~ this lessons ends soon.
- › Avoid weak descriptors pseudo-adjectives; find another way to write your idea (very, really, etc)
 - ~~She is very tall.~~ She towers over small children.
- › Avoid vague words (there, it, thing, they, etc) – they may lead you to write in passive voice
 - ~~There was a test today.~~ My evil English teacher gave a test today.
 - ~~It was hard.~~ The English test was difficult.
 - Did you see that thing he did with his thing? (Whoa! You'd better clarify that!)
 - They are watching. (Holy cow! Who are they and what are they watching?)