USAGE ERRORS FOR WHICH STUDENTS ARE RESPONSIBLE

After 30 years of teaching, it seems to me that the number of errors real students make in real writing is much lower than those covered in and given equal weight by standard texts of grammar and usage. For example, I very seldom find students making errors in pronoun case, although, of course, the correct selection of a pronoun is an important feature of good writing. I have been struck by how much time we English teachers spend year after year on these "rules", often with little effect: students will get good grades on a practice exercise or a grammar test on standard usage, yet continue to make the same errors in their writing.

My solution to this problem is to review with you the ten basic errors that I consider important, with examples drawn from the writing of my own students. Once we have reviewed these errors, you will be held responsible for avoiding them in your writing; you will lose two points for each error you do not find and correct as you prepare your final draft (up to a total of 10 points). I will indicate by number the error you are making so you can become aware of individual weaknesses you should work on when you revise. These will not be the same for every student; each has his own weaknesses, and some have to work harder than others to avoid losing points. The goal is for you to be able to say, "I have a problem with error six, so I must be particularly careful when I proofread a paper not to make that error."

I do not want to suggest that good writing is synonymous with error-free writing. A paper could be totally without errors in mechanics and yet be lifeless, dull, and superficial. A wonderful paper, full of creative and original thinking, may lose all ten points — but it doesn't have to. Good ideas are enhanced by clarity of organization and careful expression.

You should also be aware that only a good writer can make some of these errors. The student who experiments with complex structures appropriate to mature ideas risks, for example, errors in parallelism. Therefore, error-free writing is not in itself good writing, but it certainly never hurts good writing to be error-free.

Paul M. Hendrick
"I HATE GRAMMAR!"

I can understand an sympathize with the student who says, "I hate grammar!" Grammar is not a very exciting subject and in itself means nothing. People do not stand around at parties and compliment each other on their clever use of a noun infinitive phrase or criticize their dangling modifiers.

It is important, however, to distinguish grammar from usage. And usage is very important. Unfortunately, we need the language of grammar to discuss usage. So we have to review a few key grammatical terms.

GRAMMAR is descriptive. It simply records the way people put words together in sentences. In a sense each human being (each family, each group, each area of the country, each nation, etc.) has his own grammar. When we speak of English grammar, we generalize about the way most English speaking and writing people put words together. Grammar does not make value judgments: "I ain't got none" is the grammar for some speakers.

USAGE is prescriptive. Usage suggests that people in power (including those who make the language rules, write the dictionaries, etc.) use language in a particular way and that one must learn the language that is appropriate to succeed in business, professions, advanced education, etc. For some people, this is like learning standard English as a second or foreign language in addition to their everyday speech. "I ain't got none" communicates very clearly and may even meet all one's needs - but there are situations in which the person who cannot choose instead to say "I have none" or "I don't have any" will not get what he wants - a job, a college admission, a political office, a girl.

An Analogy

The more one can make choices, the more one can control his life, and the more fully human he is. The person who has in his wardrobe only a sweatshirt and torn levis has no choice. He can wear them to the football game or to hang out downtown but must also wear them to the job interview or the homecoming dance. If, however, he has also a jacket, slacks, shirt and tie, he has choices. He may not choose to wear a tie to a football game, but he doesn't have to wear a sweatshirt to a dance. He has choices that give him control over his life.

The same thing is true of language. It's not a matter of right or wrong, correct or incorrect - certainly not good and evil - but of appropriate and inappropriate. The language of the athletic field is not the language of the classroom; the language of the cafeteria is not the language of the college admissions interview. Similarly, the language of the locker room is not the language of the board room. Learn to use language appropriately in ways that give you control.
A REVIEW OF IMPORTANT TERMS FROM GRAMMAR -

a **PHRASE** is a group of grammatically related words - not containing a verb and its subject - that functions as a unit, as a single part of speech:

- the girl *(in the blue dress)* *(in the blue dress)* modifies girl
- tried *(to find a job)* *(to find a job)* is direct object of tried
- looking *(at television)* *(at television)* modifies looking

verb and its - a group of words but they are not grammatically related - therefore not a phrase:

- that functions *(as a unit)* - a group of grammatically related words but do contain a verb *(functions)* and subject *(that)* - therefore not a phrase

a **CLAUSE** is a group of grammatically related words containing a verb and its subject and either:

- expressing a complete idea that can stand alone

  - we arrived *(at the party)*
  - we understood
  - she had met him earlier

  **MAIN CLAUSE (MCL)**

  **CALLED A**

  **INDEPENDENT CLAUSE**

  **SENTENCE**

  **OR**

- not expressing a complete thought so that it must be attached to a main clause or independent clause

  - before we arrived *(at the party)*
  - that she had met him before

  **SUBORDINATE CLAUSE**

  **DEPENDENT CLAUSE**

  **SENTENCE FRAGMENT**

**NOTE:** Whether a clause is independent or not does not depend on how long the clause is. Adding a word *(subordinate conjunction or relative pronoun)* may make it longer but change the clause from independent to dependent. Subordinate clauses function as adjective, adverb or noun clauses within a main clause.

 Before we arrived *(at the party)* we understood *(that she had met him).*

**CONJUNCTIONS** - joining words three types to know:

1 - Coordinate conjunctions - join equalities and but or (for, so)

2 - Correlative conjunctions - are based on the coordinate conjunctions and also join equalities

   - both....and.....
   - either......or......
   - not only....but (also)......
   - neither......nor......

3 - Subordinate conjunctions join inequalities *(dependent to independent or subordinate to main)* and show relationships - although whereas while if because since when etc.

**NOTE:** Some subordinate conjunctions are also prepositions - before, after

Words like however, therefore, on the other hand are not conjunctions. They are called connectives, conjunctive adverbs, interrupters.
ERROR ONE - Don't use the pronoun "you" for third person statements, for generalizations. In your writing, use the word "you" only if you mean specifically the person reading your paper (your teacher or a designated audience). If you are making a generalization about more than that individual reader, use third person pronouns - one, he, she, or they (Sometimes, making generalizations plural will help you avoid sexism in your writing).

Here are some examples from comparison/contrast papers written by members of the Class of '91:

"Even though it may not show at first, as you get to know them, it becomes apparent that both Joe and Grandpa are sensitive, caring people." (Kirk Doerger)

"They are both strongly opposed to abortion and, if asked, will give you almost the same reasons why." (John Neyer)

"As you can see, the difference between Brian and Garrett is totally obvious unless you are completely blind." (Greg Rice)

"Their respective styles of meeting people are so different that if you saw them at a party, you would never know they were good friends." (Eric Schuermann)

"Joe, on the other hand, is in all top level classes, about as high as you can get, and gets all 'A's in these." (Eric Scheper)

NOTE: In speech and informal writing, no one would object to the use of the second person in sentences like those quoted above.

A note about spelling -

Few students at X. have much problem with correct spelling. For all of us, me included, there are a few words that give us trouble. If we use these words frequently, we may seem to have more problem with spelling than we really do - we could have ten spelling errors and yet be misspelling only three words.

The solution is for each individual to become aware of the words that give him trouble. Then he can check those words when he prepares his final draft. Each will create his own list.

To accomplish that goal, I suggest you
- maintain a list in your notebook or on your file folder of any word that you misspell more than once.
- practice spelling a word correctly 10 or 15 times after I pass back a paper on which I have circled misspelled syllables. (The theory here is that you have already practiced spelling the word incorrectly; now you must retrain yourself and reinforce through practice a correct habit.)
ERROR TWO - RUN ON SENTENCES

DEFINITION - the joining together of two more main clauses (or sentences) as if they were only one sentence - really an error in punctuation.

TYPE A - \[\text{M. Cl.} \underline{\text{M. Cl.}}\] no mark at all

\underline{Eric observed Stan participated.}

This type of fused or run on sentence is probably just a result of carelessness.

TYPE B - \[\text{M. Cl.} \underline{,} \text{M. Cl.}\] \(\text{CF}\)

\underline{Eric observed Stan participated.}

"Agility is necessary for defense one has to be able to get to the ball to be a good defensive player." \(\text{CF}\)

Type B is a COMMA FAULT (cf) or comma splice. It occurs when a writer joins two main clauses with only a comma. Note: a comma fault is a very particular error; it is not just any error in the use of a comma.

The CURE is to CREATE A CORRECT SENTENCE -

Cure 1 - Use a comma and a coordinate conjunction to create a compound sentence.

\[\text{M. Cl.}, \text{and} \text{M. Cl.}\] \underline{Eric observed, but Stan participated.}

Cure 2 - Use a semi-colon (a mark as strong as a comma and coordinate conjunction) to create a compound sentence.

\[\text{M. Cl.}; \text{M. Cl.}\] \underline{Eric observed; Stan participated.}

REMEMBER THAT THE WORD HOWEVER IS NOT A COORDINATE CONJUNCTION. It can be placed anywhere in a clause and will be set off by commas:

\underline{Eric observed; Stan participated, however.}
\underline{Eric observed; Stan, however, participated.}
\underline{Eric observed; however, Stan participated.}

In the third example, the semi-colon before however has nothing to do with the word however; it would be there even if however were dropped. Do not think you must put a semi-colon before the word however whenever you use it - Eric observed, Stan; however, participated.

Cure 3 - Create a correct complex sentence by subordinating one of the clauses:

Although Eric observed, Stan participated.

\underline{Eric observed while Stan participated.}

Cure 4 - Write them as two sentences: Eric observed. \underline{Stan participated.}

Cure 5 - A DASH CAN REPLACE A SEMI-COLON OR PERIOD. A comma can't.

\underline{Eric observed - Stan participated.}
ERROR THREE - SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

DEFINITION - The treatment of a piece of a sentence as if it were a main clause or a complete sentence. Often fragments occur when the writer wants to give the word group special emphasis but doesn't know how to do that correctly.

SOME TYPES OF FRAGMENTS -

Detached appositives - "He was a great president. One who really accomplished a lot and left a strong legacy."

Items in lists - "I need a lot of supplies. First, a new notebook. Then I need some pens."

Words detached for special emphasis - "He fell into the lake and the teen-aged lifeguard had to rescue him. A most embarrassing occurrence."

Relative pronoun constructions - "He has several faults. Among which is his hatred of children."

Constructions with verbals but no verb - "A good swimming race has three characteristics. The first is..."

Subordinate clauses that sound like complete sentences - BEWARE THE SUBORDINATE CONJUNCTION WHEREAS."At the finish line I was exhausted. Whereas he seemed to have vast reserves of energy." (Also be careful of other contrast subordinate conjunctions like while, although. You could use conjunctive adverbs like however, on the other hand, even the coordinate conjunction but.)

CURES -

1. Make a sentence out of the fragment:
   "He was a great president. He really accomplished a lot..."
   "He has several faults. Among them is his hatred of..."
   "A good swimming race has three characteristics. The first is..."
   "At the finish line I was exhausted. He, on the other hand,..."

2. Often just attach the fragment with a comma to the clause or sentence to which it is logically attached.
   "He was a great president, one who really accomplished..."
   "He fell into the lake and the teen-aged lifeguard had to rescue him, a most embarrassing occurrence."
   "At the finish line I was exhausted whereas he seemed to..."

3. If one wants the fragment separated for more special emphasis than Cure 2 would provide - use a dash but not a period.
   "I need a lot of supplies - first, a new notebook..."
   "He was a great president - one who really accomplished..."
   "He has several faults - among which is his hatred of..."

A GOOD WAY TO FIND AND CORRECT RUN ON SENTENCES AND SENTENCE FRAGMENTS IS TO READ YOUR PAPER ALOUD VERY SLOWLY. OFTEN YOUR VOICE WILL TELL YOU WHERE THE FULL STOPS BELONG OR DO NOT BELONG.
COMMA ERRORS - There are many rules governing the use of the comma. However, the vast majority of errors involve only two rules. If you master these, you will make very few mistakes with the comma.

Remember punctuation attempts to suggest the pauses and emphases of spoken English. A comma is a pause - briefer than that of a period, semi-colon, dash or colon.

Both of our two comma rules are based on the importance of pausing before a main clause so that it gets the emphasis it deserves as the main idea of the sentence.

ERROR FOUR - Place a comma after introductory elements that precede the main clause. The comma provides the pause that gives emphasis to the main clause.

Types of Introductory Elements:

- adverb clause, main clause
- participial phrase, main clause
- string of (two or more) prepositional phrases, main clause
- long (four words or more) prepositional phrase, main clause
- infinitive phrase, main clause
- introductory word, main clause
- anything moved out of normal order, main clause

There are two ways to break this rule:

- not putting the comma in when it is needed
  
  After he gave his talk, he received several compliments.

- or putting one in when it is not needed. If the main clause comes first, it already gets the emphasis it needs. No comma is needed because the main clause gets its emphasis by being at the beginning of the sentence.
  
  He received several compliments after he finished his talk.

NOTE: An introductory clause can appear in the middle of a compound sentence.

John had several dreams, and although they did not all come true, he achieved a great many of them.

NOTE: It is often better style to place the main clause at the end of the sentence to create a certain suspense or tension.

Two terms to know:

- loose sentence: subject and verb come first, followed by modifiers and dependent elements.
  
  The computer may not be able to do what you want it to do if there is not a good supply of software.

- periodic sentence: dependent elements and modifiers come first followed by main clause subject and verb.
  
  Although he lost his shoe, Greg won the race.

If the songwriter really puts his heart into a song, the listener will feel the emotion.
ERROR FIVE - Commas and Coordinating Conjunctions

The Rule - place a comma before a coordinating conjunction that joins two main clauses Main Clause, and Main Clause.

Rationale: to provide a pause that gives emphasis to the second main clause.

Converse: no comma is necessary if the conjunction is joining two words, two phrases, two subordinate clauses, two predicates.

Hint: Compound main clauses or compound predicates? check for a new subject after the coordinating conjunction.

NOTE: There could be a comma before a coordinate conjunction that does not join main clauses for some other reason.

noun, noun, and noun

subject, adjective clause, and subject verb.

Two ways to lose points:

a. putting a comma where none is needed;

They have involved their children in sports and stress religion heavily.

b. not putting a comma where it is needed;

He feels right at home with a screwdriver or hammer and he can fix anything.

MINOR PROBLEM - If an APPOSITIVE is a series.

Ordinarily, we set off an appositive with commas.

He collected the ingredients, an expensive list of exotic spices, and began to cook their meal.

If the appositive contains commas, we need something stronger than commas to separate the appositive from the rest of the sentence. Use dashes.

Not - He collected the ingredients, eggs, vanilla, and cream, and began to cook their meal.

But - He collected the ingredients - eggs, vanilla, and cream - and began to cook their meal.

A NOTE ABOUT INTENTIONAL ERRORS

Sometimes you might want to use a sentence fragment. Or sometime you might want to omit a comma required by a rule - perhaps the two main clauses are so short that you don't think you need a comma before the coordinate conjunction.

WHAT DO YOU DO? Write a note in the margin clarifying that you are consciously breaking a rule. I may not agree with your choice, but I will not take points off if you indicate you are not following a rule by choice rather than out of ignorance.
ERROR SIX - Use of the SEMI-COLON. There are only THREE uses, the first of which is relatively unimportant.

1. A series is usually punctuated with commas to separate items:
   ...
   Walter Lee, Beneatha, Ruth, and Travis.
   Use a semi-colon to separate the items in a series if any one or more of the items contains a comma (commas then no longer being strong enough to indicate the distinction between items)
   ...
   Walter Lee; Beneatha; Ruth, his wife; and Travis.
   ...
   Boston, Massachusetts; Albany, New York; and Reno, Nevada.

2. To join two main clauses when there is NO COORDINATE CONJUNCTION (to prevent a comma fault - see ERROR TWO)
   The team lost; I am still satisfied.
   The team lost; however, I am still satisfied.

3. To join two main clauses when there is a coordinate conjunction, but there are commas in the clause preceding the conjunction. (Using commas for some other purpose - say around an appositive, after an introductory element, within a series - would make the comma too weak to indicate the important pause before a new main clause.)
   We bought eggs, bacon, bread, and orange juice; and Mom cooked a large breakfast for us.
   Rule 3 is often ignored - it's rule 2 you must work on.

THE SEMI-COLON TEST (for rules 2 and 3) - look to the left and look to the right, and in both cases you should find a main clause.

ERROR SEVEN - AGREEMENT

1. VERBS MUST AGREE WITH THEIR SUBJECTS IN NUMBER
   Trouble area A - when an object of a preposition falls next to the verb and is different in number from the subject -
   Subject (OP) Verb (Distinguish between Subject and OP)
   The laws (of a civilized society) require that we care for the young.
   Trouble area B - Some pronouns "sound plural" but are indeed singular - everyone, anyone, somebody, everybody, each, neither...
   Everyone is leaving right after school.

2. PRONOUNS MUST AGREE WITH THEIR ANTECEDENT IN NUMBER (AND GENDER).
   The traditional rule contains sexism - "When the antecedent may be either masculine or feminine, use the masculine pronoun, which is acceptable standard usage."
   Each of the students has prepared his report.
   Evolving non-sexist language suggest we can avoid the problem often by using the gender-free plural pronoun -
   All of the students have prepared their reports.
   The same word cannot be singular with a verb and have a plural pronoun renaming it - Each of the students has prepared their...
ERROR EIGHT - DANGLING MODIFIERS

- when there is no specific noun in the sentence for the modifier to modify:

  Our responsibilities went unmet, (causing a lot of pain.)

or

- when the word that the modifier does modify grammatically it cannot modify logically (often humor results):

  (After four days of waiting, the weather cleared.
  (While taking pictures, a thorn scratched him.

THE RED FLAG AREA - (...) modifier(...), Noun......

When they appear at the end of the sentence, they are less obvious:

A person's endurance is greatly increased (when running track.)

PASSIVE VOICE can lead to dangling modifiers since the actor, the subject gets dropped or buried:

This flexibility can be obtained (by doing hard exercises and lifting weights or using nautilus equipment.)

SOLUTIONS -

- Fix the modifier to clarify who performs the action:

  ([After we waited four days] the weather cleared.
  A person's endurance is greatly increased [when he runs track.]

- Insert the correct word for the modifier to modify:

  (While taking pictures, he was scratched by a thorn.
  (After four days of waiting,) we welcomed the clearing weather.

ERROR NINE - VAGUE PRONOUN REFERENCE

NOUNS can name ideas that are expressed in many words (for example, nouns like effect, influence, idea, characteristic, aspect, challenge, feature, etc.)

PRONOUNS, however, must rename a noun; that noun is the antecedent.

When words like THIS and WHICH are used to rename not one noun but an idea expressed in several words, we have VAGUE REFERENCE:

Mike is your typical outgoing teenager. (This) can be seen at......
Grandma Miller is very artistic, (which) can best be reflected in...

A RED FLAG AREA - Almost any time a sentence starts with the word this followed by a verb, you will have vague reference.

CURE: never use the word this as a subject.

  turn the word this into an adjective:

  This idea is......
  This characteristic is......

CURE FOR WHICH: insert a noun for which to modify

  ...., an advantage which...... ......., a concept which......
THE FLAKE OPTION

During his sophomore year in a top section of English, Jeff Falk wrote unusually long papers with thorough and thoughtful development. A skilled writer, Jeff still made a few mechanical errors. He protested that he was penalized for writing longer papers — the longer the paper the more chance for mechanical errors and the increased opportunity to lose points on his grade.

I refused to sympathize — good writers shouldn't make mechanical errors despite the length of the paper! But inside I felt a little guilty. The next year I gave myself the option of not deducting points for mechanical errors that appeared near the end of longer than usual papers. While this option was too late to benefit Jeff — whom I used to call Jeff "Flake", I did name the option after him.

Therefore, it is the teacher's option to decide a paper has gone beyond expected length and to stop deducting points for mechanical errors.

ERROR TEN — PARALLEL STRUCTURE

PARALLEL means "of equal value" or "in the same grammatical form"

nouns // nouns infinitives // infinitives

phrases // phrases participles // participles
clauses // clauses gerunds // gerunds etc.

CERTAIN CONSTRUCTIONS MUST BE PARALLEL:

Compounds A and B A // B

Items in a series A, B, C, and D A // B // C // D

Comparisons prefer A to B A // B

rather A than B A // B

more for A than for B A // B

That which is joined by CORRELATIVE CONJUNCTIONS —

not only A but (also) B A // B

both A and B A // B
either A or B A // B

neither A nor B A // B

whether A or B A // B

NOTE: Often the first word of the correlative conjunction pair is simply misplaced. Check what comes after the second word (the coordinate conjunction part: and, but, or) and make what comes after the first word (not only, both, either, etc.) parallel to it.

He (not only) enjoys fishing (but also) cooking the catch.

He will (either) go to the store (or) to the gas station for you.