

## COMMON GRAMMAR AND USAGE MISTAKES

Below is a list of grammar and usage mistakes that are common. Please remember that in English, as in just about every language, the distinction between what's actually incorrect and what's a matter of style is often very subtle. You can justify bending or breaking almost any language "mistake" if doing so makes your writing more comprehensible or (especially in poetry) more beautiful.

### REDUNDANCY

Redundancy means repetition. Hee hee! But seriously folks... beware of saying the same thing more than once. In some cases, it can be useful: for example, to emphasize your point ("That chocolate was good. I mean really, really good.") or for dramatic rhetorical effect. However, there are some instances where redundancy is just plain wrong. And etc. Etc. is short for the Latin et cetera which means literally "and so forth." Therefore, when you say "and etc." you're really saying "and and so forth." This is clearly redundant. Just say "etc" (or preferably "et cetera"). (It may help you to remember that "etc" was once abbreviated &c.) ATM Machine The letters ATM stand for "Automated Teller Machine." Therefore, when you say "ATM Machine" you're really saying "Automated Teller Machine Machine." This is obviously redundant. Just say "I'm going to the ATM." PIN Number PIN stands for Personal Identification Number. Therefore you're saying "Personal Identification Number Number." Again, redundant. Just say "I need my PIN." HIV Virus Human Immunodeficiency Virus. Are you sensing a trend? SAT Test Scholastic Achievement Test. You get the picture.

### COMMA SPLICE

A comma splice is the incorrect use of a comma to connect two independent clauses. (Recall that an independent clause is a phrase that is grammatically and conceptually complete: that is, it can stand on its own as a sentence.) To correct the comma splice, you can: ##replace the comma with a period, forming two sentences ##replace the comma with a semicolon

##join the two clauses with a conjunction such as "and," "because," "but," etc.

Example:

I like Sarah, she is very sexy.

INCORRECT

I like Sarah. She is very sexy.

CORRECT

I like Sarah; she is very sexy.

CORRECT

I like Sarah, because she is very sexy.

CORRECT

### DANGLING PARTICIPLES

A participle is a verb-form that ends in -ing. It is called "dangling" when it doesn't agree with its subject. While walking down the road, a tree caught Sarah's

attention.

The subject of the sentence is "a tree," but it is not the tree that is doing the walking, therefore the participle "walking" is dangling. To correct the sentence, write: While walking down the road, Sarah noticed a tree

or A tree caught Sarah's attention as she walked down the road.

Remember that not all words that end in -ing are participles (e.g. thing) and some participles are gerunds depending on context. (A gerund is a participle that is functioning as a noun, e.g. "My favorite activity is sleeping.")

#### ENDING A SENTENCE WITH A PREPOSITION

Contrary to popular belief, there is no agreement on this one among English professionals. In general, especially if your audience is strict about rules, don't end a sentence with a preposition. Prepositions are little words that indicate position and such: with, at, by, from, etc. In general a preposition should come before ("pre"-position) the noun it modifies. So you should change That's the warrior I must talk to

to That's the warrior to whom I must talk.

However, if too many "to whom"s and "of which"s are making your writing unnecessarily clumsy, go ahead and end with the preposition, especially in informal writing. Remember the famous example (credited to Winston Churchill) that goes: "This is the kind of thing up with which I will not put!"

#### HOPEFULLY

Technically, this word is an adverb meaning "in a hopeful way." Therefore, "Gabrielle looked hopefully at Sarah" is correct while "Hopefully we'll make it to Athens before nightfall" is incorrect. However, like so many other words, this one has evolved to take on a different meaning than its original.

#### I VS. ME

Sarah and me are going to Athens.

INCORRECT

This horse belongs to Sarah and I.

INCORRECT

"I" is a pronoun that must be the subject, never the object, of a verb. "Me" is a pronoun that must be the object, never the subject. (The same is true for he/him, she/her, we/us, etc.)

As a simple test, try removing Sarah from the sentence. You wouldn't say "Me is going to Athens." You'd say "I am going," so say "Sarah and I are going." You wouldn't say "This horse belongs to I," you'd say "This horse belongs to me," so say "This horse belongs to Sarah and me."

Contrary to the belief of Katherine's friend John, "Sarah and I" is not always correct.

#### PRONOUN AGREEMENT

When using indefinite pronouns (e.g. someone, anyone, nobody etc.), the antecedent verb should be singular.

Does everyone know where their hat is?

INCORRECT

Does everyone know where his hat is?

Correct, but sexist

Does everyone know where her hat is?

Technically correct only if "everyone" is a group of women

This one is problematic for many people today because the correct version is considered sexist. As you probably know, in the English language the masculine is usually used for general cases: for example, "The reader will notice as he proceeds through the book that..." or "When I pass someone on the street, I try to smile at him." In much of modern English scholarly literature, attempts are made to bypass this problem, for example by alternating the masculine and feminine. (Ex: there's a weekly column about baby care in my local paper. The author uses "he" and "she" in alternating paragraphs. So one paragraph might say "If your baby cries, he might be hungry" and the next will say "When teaching your baby to talk, make sure she listens carefully" or whatever.) This is sometimes clumsy and awkward. For myself, I usually try to avoid the indefinite pronoun. In the example above, I'd probably try to substitute "Everyone, make sure you know where your hat is."

#### SPLIT INFINITIVES

An infinitive is the form of a verb that begins with "to." (This problem does not exist in any other language of which I'm aware, since infinitives are single words in every language but English.) Splitting an infinitive means placing another word or words between the "to" and the infinitive. This is considered bad by purists, but, like the sentence-ending preposition, it's mostly a matter of style.

Sarah seems to always win a fight.

TECHNICALLY INCORRECT

Sarah always seems to win a fight.

CORRECT

Some semi-purists say it is okay if only one adverb separates the "to" from the infinitive:

To boldly go where no one has gone before.

As with the sentence-ending preposition, though, don't worry too much about this.

Especially if the split infinitive makes your sentence clearer or more graceful, go ahead and use it.