

Grammar Review

A Useable Usage Guide

In the back of many writing textbooks you often find lists of rules about grammar, which are generally stated in terms of something you must or must not do. Whatever the grammar rule is, it is generally followed by a few examples of the rule being violated and then corrected. Sometimes, the textbook will then present a few exercises, and you are required to decide which sentences are correct and which are incorrect and instructed to correct the “wrong” ones. The theory of this type of instruction is that once you have read the rule and practiced the exercises that you will be able to avoid making that particular mistake in your own writing. This type of instruction may work for people who are highly motivated to learn this way, but research generally suggests that not many students show significant improvement in their writing after this type of instruction. In fact, students generally find this process particularly unsatisfactory and mostly mysterious.

In my own classes, I often asked students where they think these grammar rules come from. In almost every class, students will suggest that English teachers have developed these grammar rules. These grammar rules are more correctly understood as a changing description of how people use language in their daily communications. The rules aren’t so much “invented” by English teachers as they are created by actual writers.

Grammar or Usage?

Actually, the word “grammar” is not the correct term to describe the problems that writers have with their sentences and word choices. “Grammar” is best understood as a term from the field of linguistics that describes the way any language uses its words to construct sentences. What we are really talking about in this section is more correctly called **usage conventions**. The word “convention,” which has appeared in several places in this book, describes the way writers generally do things. So “usage conventions” are the ways words are most frequently used in the English language and the way sentences are generally put together by actual writers. The idea, in most cases, is that writers make conscious choices about what words to use and how to construct their sentences, and they generally choose words and structures that will make their writing understandable to the greatest number of readers. Over time, these choices become conventional.

Using appropriate conventions of sentence structure and word choice contributes to the writer’s credibility, as well. True, experienced writers sometimes find places in their writing where sentences seem to work better if the accepted usage conventions are violated on purpose, but as with all rhetorical choices, writers need to think about what readers will expect of particular genres and particular types of writing. Once again, it’s about the choices you make. All effective, serious writers have reference books for style and usage and do not hesitate to look up answers to questions they have about sentence structures and word choices. Following are some of the major usage issues that writers generally have.

Words I—Spell-checkers, Missused Words, Possession and Contraction

Spell-checkers: The very least you should do for your readers is to run your word processor's spell-checker over your writing before you consider having someone else read it. The spell-checker is only the first step, of course, but most readers these days will consider misspelled words to be almost insulting, since almost everyone has a word processor with a spell-checker. Still, the word processor doesn't know whether you mean "there," "their," or "they're," of course, so reading your work carefully and having someone else read it before you consider it complete is vital.

Missused Words: The difference between "there," "their," and "they're" is more than just a spelling problem, of course. These words all mean something different, and we sometimes use the wrong one because they sound alike. The most common of these misused words are:

a and an: "a" is used before a consonant sound, and "an" is used before a vowel sound: *a lamp, a book, a history lesson, an opera, an onion, an igloo.*

accept and except: "accept" means to receive something; "except" means "to exclude" something: *I will accept all of your argument except the second point.*

advice and advise: "advice" is the noun and "advise" is the verb: *I advise you to listen to this advice.*

affect and effect: "affect" is usually the verb, which means "to influence"; "effect" is usually the noun, which means the "result": *Being consciously aware of some usage conventions will affect your grade. The effect of consciously choosing usage conventions is better writing.*

can and may: "may" is generally used to mean "permission"; "can" indicates "ability": *You may attend the concert if you can find tickets.*

cite and site: "site" is a particular place; "cite" is to quote or reference something: *You may use a quotation from a good site on the web, as long as you cite your source.*

complement and compliment: "complement" means "to go with" or "to complete"; "compliment" means "to flatter": *Let me compliment you on your complementary wardrobe.*

farther and further: if you mean to indicate actual distance, use "farther"; if you mean quantity or degree, use "further": *Farther up the road, we will stop and discuss this further.*

its and it's: "it's" is always a contraction meaning "it is"; "its" is the possessive of "it": *It's imperative that we discuss this problem and its implications.*

lie and lay: "lie" generally means "to recline" or "to rest on a surface"; "lay" means "to put or place something": *Lay your backpack on the counter and lie down on the couch.*

loose and lose: "loose" is the opposite of "tight"; "lose" is the act of misplacing something: *If your rope is loose, then you may lose your footing.*

past and passed: these two words have very different meanings: *The "past" always refers to time that has "passed."*

set and sit: you "sit" down or something will "sit" on the counter, if you "set" it there: *Set your books on the counter and sit down on the couch.*

since and sense: these words are often confused, but they are not interchangeable: *Since you obviously have no sense of direction, I will look at a map.*

then and than: “then” is always about time; “than” is about comparisons: *I then decided that he was more intelligent than I.*

there, their, and they’re: “there” is always about place, or it can be used in sentences like “there are only two books on the table”; “their” is always possessive; “they’re” is always the contraction of “they are”: *They’re their books over there.*

to, too, and two: “two” is, of course, the number; “too” indicates a quantity, as in “too much” or “too few”; or, it may also be used in place of the word “also”; almost every other usage is “to”: *In order not to have too many choices, I, too, will limit my selection to two books.*

toward and towards: these words are basically interchangeable, but in American English, we generally use “toward” instead of “towards.”

where and were: “where” is always about place; “were” is the verb: *Where were you going?*

whether, weather, and rather: “weather” refers to the temperature, precipitation, and such; “whether” refers to a choice, and is sometimes confused with “rather”: *Whether you choose to attend or not, I would rather not go if the weather is bad.*

your and you’re: “your” is the possessive pronoun; “you’re” is always the contraction for “you are”: *You’re going to need your raincoat.*

Contractions: Many students have been told never to use contractions in academic papers. However, there may be some cases where the situation for the writing calls for a more “relaxed” tone, in which contractions may be acceptable. Like all choices in writing, the decision of whether to use contractions or not should be made according to the situation, the genre, and the ideal community of readers for the specific piece of writing. Most readers and writers will have little problem with “don’t,” “isn’t,” “wouldn’t,” “couldn’t” and other typical contractions, but be very careful when using contractions that substitute for subject/verb constructions such as “I’m,” “they’re,” and “you’re,” which stand in for “I am,” “they are,” and “you are.” Even experienced writers will sometimes accidentally use “their” when they mean “they’re” and “your” when they mean “you’re.” It’s so easy to make this error that many writers just avoid contractions altogether.

Remember that “can’t” is the contraction for “cannot” and that “cannot” is generally one word. There are exceptions, of course, and at times, writers will emphasize the “not” by making “cannot” into two words: “can not.” Generally, though, “cannot” is one word.

Possession: In English, the possessive form of a noun is generally formed by adding an apostrophe and an “s” or by simply adding the apostrophe. Think of it this way: the apostrophe is really another kind of contraction, used to stand in for the word “his”:

Bill his hat.

Bill’s hat.

So the apostrophe can be thought of as really another form of contraction, in which the word “his” has been left out. This goes for feminine nouns or nouns that have no gender, as well.

Susie her artwork

The company his profits.

Susie’s artwork.

The company’s profits.

Inexperienced writers often get confused because they see some words that have only the apostrophe without the added “s” to make them possessive. The convention is that if the word is a longer word that ends in “s” that you want to make possessive, then you may add the apostrophe and leave off the extra “s.”

Socrates’ argument.

The Jones’ house.

There are no absolute rules for what constitutes a long word, though. The writer has the choice of adding the extra “s” or leaving it off.

Apostrophes are almost never used to make words plural. The exceptions are with numbers and letters:

I am not old enough to remember the 1950’s.

There were seven A’s in the class.

There are a few words that even experienced writers sometimes misuse when making plurals and possessives. Be very careful that you know the difference between these spellings:

company	company’s	companies	companies’
society	society’s	societies	societies’

Most spelling, contraction, and possession issues can be resolved by careful reading of the work. Experienced writers get used to mentally checking for commonly misspelled and misused words as they proofread their own or another’s writing. Once again, reading your work out loud and having others read it as forms of proofreading are your best defense against these kinds of common mistakes.

Words II—Global and Gender-neutral Language

Global Issues: These days, readers are likely to have varied backgrounds that may hinder their understanding of cultural references and common clichés. In addition, many businesses and professions operate across national and cultural lines, so writers must learn to be careful about including words, phrases, and expressions for which readers with other cultural backgrounds will have no understanding. For instance, many writers will use phrases such as “in the ballpark,” “bottom line,” or “at the end of the day.” These clichés are generally culturally specific to American English, and readers with other cultural backgrounds may take them literally.

Gender-neutral Language: The use of “gender-neutral” language is just a good choice. It’s not a communist plot, “political correctness,” or a scam perpetrated by “feminazis.” It’s just good rhetoric. Plus, it’s probably required for writing produced for most companies and in most professions; it is required in all documents used and approved by local, state, and federal agencies. Very few rational people advocate extremes, such as in turning “manhole cover” and “history” into “personhole cover” or “herstory.” Using gender-neutral language is merely a way to include more readers and reflect the realities of our modern world:

Avoid	Use
Mrs.	Ms
manpower	human resources, work force
mankind	humankind, people
modern man	modern society, modern civilization

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chairman	chairperson, chair, presiding officer
congressman	member of Congress, representative
fireman	firefighter
stewardess	flight attendant
policeman	police officer
salesman	sales agent
founding fathers	pioneers, founders
gentleman's agreement	informal agreement, oral contract
each nurse treats her patient with care	each nurse treats patients with care
a president sets his own agenda	presidents set their own agendas
every employee should sign his own card	all employees should sign their own cards

While the use of “his or hers,” “him or her,” “he or she,” “him- or herself,” etc. is awkward, it’s correct unless you know for sure the gender of your reader. Changing pronouns to the plural is often the best way to fix this problem: “Each student must complete his or her own work” becomes “all students must complete their own work.” Make sure that your pronouns (his, her, them, their) agree in number with their referents.

There is no reason to use odd constructions like he/she, him/her or s/he, etc. If you need to, the language is perfectly equipped for this: just use “he or she,” “him or her,” etc.

Word III—Vague Words and Clichés

Vague Words: There are no words that are absolutely forbidden under the right circumstances, and that includes what are normally called “vague” words. Still, you should keep an eye out for vague words and phrases as you’re proofreading your work and that of others. Basically, these vague words come in three main types: vague nouns, vague verbs, and vague quantifiers.

1. **Vague nouns:** One of the jobs of a skilled writer is make it clear in each sentence exactly what it is that he or she is writing about. Often, inexperienced writers will introduce vague nouns into their writing, which makes it hard for the reader to keep up with what the subject of the sentence is:

There are three aspects of the advertisement that deal with the myth of cowboys. This is talked about in many ways by critics.

In the first place, both of these sentences are “expletive” or “dummy subject” sentences. In other words, the things that are being written about in the sentence are not named as the actual subjects of the sentences. Instead, the subject of the first sentence is “there” and the subject in the second sentence is “this.” You can make these sentences stronger by moving the “actor” of the sentences into the subject position:

Three aspects of the advertisement deal with the myth of cowboys. Critics talk about these aspects in many ways.

Any time you begin a sentence with “there are,” “it is,” or similar “expletive” constructions, you might consider rewording those sentences.

Secondly, you might consider replacing the noun “aspects,” since you might think of a more

specific word to describe the “aspects” of an advertisement. What kind of “aspects” are they? Are they “design elements,” “symbols,” “images?”

Three design elements of the advertisement deal with the myth of cowboys. Critics talk about these elements in many ways.

By removing the vague nouns, we have begun to improve these sentences. Don't be afraid of repeating yourself too much by using the specific nouns for the things you are writing about. Experienced writers work hard to find different words to vary their sentences without resorting to the use of vague nouns.

2. **Vague verbs:** Another cause of weak sentences is weak verbs. Having strong, specific, active verbs is vital to writing exciting sentences:

Three design elements of the advertisement deal with the myth of cowboys. Critics talk about these elements in many ways.

Let's replace “deal with” with a more specific verb. How do the design elements “deal with” the myth of cowboys? Do they “suggest” the myth of cowboys? Do they “promote” the myth? Do they “relate to” the myth?

Three design elements of the advertisement relate to the myth of cowboys. Critics talk about these elements in many ways.

That makes the first sentence stronger but what could we do to strengthen the second? First, it is generally conventional to discuss what others have written about a subject by avoiding words like “talks” and “says” and using words like “discuss,” “analyze,” “argue,” and other more specific verbs:

Three design elements of the advertisement relate to the myth of cowboys. Critics discuss these elements in many ways.

Using stronger, more specific verbs will almost always improve your sentences.

3. **Vague Quantifiers:** Vague quantifiers may also weaken sentences:

Three design elements of the advertisement relate to the myth of cowboys. Critics discuss these elements in many ways.

One place we could still strengthen our sentences is at the very end of the second sentence. We should be explaining to the reader just how critics discuss the design elements. The sentence does suggest that the writer will then explain how “critics discuss these elements.” However, it would probably be better to go ahead and indicate this:

Three design elements of the advertisement relate to the myth of cowboys. Critics discuss these elements in at least four ways.

There is no absolute set of rules about what words should never be used in your writing, of course. As with almost every other choice you can make about your writing, the situation—including the genre, the topic, and the ideal community of readers—must dictate the appropriateness of the language. Still, if you begin to work on getting vague words out of your writing as you revise and proofread, you will be taking the first steps toward stronger, more effective writing.

Clichés: Sometimes, writers will employ clichés. The reason that some phrases become clichés is, of course, because everyone uses them, and so effective writers will often work to eliminate as many clichés from their work as possible in order to strengthen their own credibility. Readers will want to read your ideas, opinions, and arguments in your own language and not hear the same old clichés. In addition, many clichés are culturally specific and will not translate well to

readers from other cultures. As you look at this partial list of clichés and suggested replacements, ask yourself how each might be misunderstood by a reader from another culture:

Cliché	Possible Replacement
the bottom line	final cost, ultimate expense
at the end of the day	finally
in the ballpark	approximately
up the creek	in trouble
water under the bridge	forgiven
face the music	accept the consequences
pass the buck	deny accountability
worth its weight in gold	very valuable
sink or swim	succeed or fail
rise to the occasion	perform as expected
give 110 percent	over-achieve
hit the nail on the head	exactly right
in today's ever-changing society	in the last 10 years of American culture
due to the fact that	because

The above list is not complete, of course, as it would take many pages to consider every cliché and its possible replacement. The trick is to read your work carefully with the goal of making your writing as direct, as clear, and as unique as possible.

Punctuation—Periods, Colons, Semi-colons, and Commas

Some of the most misunderstood usage conventions are the ones about punctuation marks. Generally, we all know how to use periods at the end of sentences, but the use of colons, semi-colons, and commas is often more difficult to understand clearly. Actually, if you think about what the punctuation does in the sentence, it then becomes easier to use. Punctuation marks simply signal how readers should read and understand a particular sentence, and every change in punctuation will cause something different to happen in readers' minds as they read. Skilled writers have learned to place their punctuation marks with an awareness of how they work.

1. The **period** (.): Most of us realize that periods come at the end of sentences to signal that a sentence—a complete idea—has been completed. As written English evolved, it became conventional to put a small dot, a period, at the end of a complete idea and to start the next idea with a larger, capitalized, letter. But what does it mean to say that a sentence is a complete idea?

In order to have a complete idea, you must be thinking about something (the **subject**) and you must think that some action is happening to that subject (the **predicate**, which contains the **verb**), even if that action is simply that the thing you are thinking about exists:

I am.

“I am” is a complete sentence—a complete idea—because there is something being thought about (“I”) and something is happening to it (“am”). Increasing the number of subjects and the number of things happening to those subjects does not change the convention:

Bill, his friends, and several of the people from the office go to the park every weekend and play football.

Each complete idea—each sentence—needs to have a subject and a predicate. If not, you have a **fragment**. If you have trouble with writing fragments, the best thing to do is to simply read your sentences out loud and listen carefully to hear if the sentence includes something that you are thinking about and that something is happening to that thing.

2. The **colon (:)**: The colon is actually fairly simple to use, although many people have a wrong idea of what it really does. Briefly, a colon introduces any type of material that comes at the end of a sentence. You can introduce a single word:

There is one reason to buy our product: reliability.

You can introduce a phrase:

There is one reason to buy our product: excellent reliability.

You can introduce another sentence:

There is one reason to buy our product: it is reliable.

Or you can introduce a list of items:

There are three reasons to buy our product: reliability, ease of repair, and cost.

Most people believe that colons always precede lists, but as you can see, a colon may be used to introduce just about anything. The way to check that you have used the colon correctly is to substitute the word “namely” where you are thinking about using the colon:

There is one reason to buy our product (namely) reliability.

There is one reason to buy our product (namely) excellent reliability.

There is one reason to buy our product (namely) it is reliable.

There are three reasons to buy our product (namely) reliability, ease of repair, and cost.

The “namely” test is not infallible, but it will generally give you an idea of where you might include a colon.

There are two small things to watch out for when using a colon. The first is that you generally do not see the colon following a verb:

Bill's friends are: Ziggy, Tom, and Vivian.

The reason is that the action of the verb introduces the items that follow it. The second thing to watch for is that you already have some word or phrase that does the introducing:

There are three reasons to buy our product, for example: reliability, ease of repair, and cost.

If you read that sentence and substitute the word “namely” for the colon, then you have both a phrase (“for example”) and a piece of punctuation (:) doing that job:

There are three reasons to buy our product, for example, (namely): reliability, ease of repair, and cost.

Other words and phrases that generally do the same work as a colon are “such as,” “for instance,” and “including.” You will generally not find a colon next to these words.

The fact is that conventional use of the colon is generally considered a high-level English skill.

That seems surprising considering that, with just a little work and practice, almost anyone can learn how to use a colon. As we noted, many people believe that colons only come before lists. Colons may, however, introduce a word, a phrase, another sentence, or a list. Just check whether the word “namely” can be substituted. We suggest that you practice writing some sentences that include a colon and then watch for a chance to try them out in your own writing.

3. The **semi-colon (;)**: The semi-colon is designed to do two things: it joins two sentences, and it acts as a sort of “supercomma.” Let’s look at an example of how the semi-colon can be used to connect two sentences:

Bill is a good student. He studies all the time.

If we were to write an entire paragraph with this same type of sentence, it might become boring or distracting. Since these two sentences have a cause and effect relationship (Bill is a good student because he studies all the time), we can join them with a semi-colon.

Bill is a good student; he studies all the time.

Generally, the semi-colon can be used to connect any two sentences, but is used most effectively when the two sentences have a cause and effect relationship of some sort or when they indicate opposites:

Bill is a good student; John is not.

Generally, it is considered acceptable to join two sentences together with a semi-colon if those sentences have a cause and effect relationship, are opposites, or when one makes a “comment” of some sort on the other. It is very important that you have a complete sentence on both sides of the semi-colon, however.

You may remember seeing a semi-colon used with words like “in fact,” “however,” “indeed,” etc. This is basically the same thing as joining two sentences together; however, one of these words (they are called “conjunctive adverbs”) is placed after the colon to clarify for the reader just what the relationship between the two sentences is:

Bill is a good student; however, he rarely studies.

The use of these conjunctive adverbs after the semi-colon is always structured the same way: the semi-colon, then the word, and then a comma. Be careful that there is a sentence on both sides of the semi-colon, especially if you use one of these words. The same group of words can also have other uses:

Bill, however, is a good student.

In this case, “however” is merely an “interrupter” and needs to be surrounded by commas. So you must check to establish that you have a complete sentence on both sides of the semi-colon, whether you include the conjunctive adverb or not.

The semi-colon really only has one other conventional use. You may, if you have a large list of items that need to be sub-divided, use a comma to sub-divide them:

*I have lived in San Fransisco, California, Natchitoches, Louisiana, Tampa, Florida,
and Dallas, Texas.*

This sentence is confusing because we need to indicate that the list of places needs to be sub-divided. We may use a semi-colon for that job:

*I have lived in San Fransisco, California; Natchitoches, Louisiana; Tampa, Florida;
and Dallas, Texas.*

When you need to, you may use the semi-colon as a sort of “supercomma.”

As with learning other conventional uses of punctuation, there may be exceptions to these two conventional uses of the semi-colon. Nevertheless, if you practice using the semi-colon as outlined above, you will achieve some greater variation in your sentence structures.

4. The **comma (,)**: Although commas can seem confusing, they really only perform three functions: they separate more than two items in a list, they join two sentences together (with some help from a coordinating conjunction), and they attach non-essential, non-sentence information to sentences. Let’s take a look at those uses one at a time:

A. First, you may use a comma to separate more than two items in a list:

I got up this morning, went downstairs, and drank a cup of coffee.

I will attend the meeting, finish writing this report, and meet you at the coffee shop.

The lists of things in the above two sentences has conveniently been marked by separating the three items with commas. This really just makes it easy for the reader to tell where one item leaves off and the other begins. Recently, it has become somewhat conventional to leave off the last comma:

I got up this morning, went downstairs and drank a cup of coffee.

I will attend the meeting, finish writing this report and meet you at the coffee shop.

Leaving the last comma off is actually more conventional in the field of journalism than anywhere else, though, and some have said that this got started as a way to save space in the newspaper (those commas add up, I guess). Generally, it is probably better to include the comma before the last item unless you’re writing for a newspaper.

B. Along with the semi-colon, a comma may also be used to join two sentences together, but only if the comma has the help of a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). The important thing to remember when you join two sentences together with a comma is that the comma must also be accompanied by a coordinating conjunction:

Bill is a good student, but he rarely studies.

The reason we can join the two sentences together with a comma and a coordinating conjunction is that the coordinating conjunction makes it clear what the relationship is between the two sentences. Without the coordinating conjunction, the comma does not supply the relationship between the two sentences and is not sufficient to hold them together.

Bill is a good student, he rarely studies.

You may already know that joining two sentences together with only a comma is known as a **comma splice**. The comma has been used to “splice,” or join, the two sentences together. Look at this example carefully, as it is considered to be unconventional in most cases to splice two sentences together with only a comma. You may join two sentences together with a comma, but you should include a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) to signal the relationship between the two sentences. Notice how the relationship between the two sentences changes if we use different coordinating conjunctions:

Bill is a good student, and he studies all the time.

Bill is a good student, so he studies all the time.

Bill is a good student, but he studies all the time.

Bill is a good student, for he studies all the time.

Readers may not be confused if you leave off the comma in this situation and just link the sentences with the coordinating conjunction, but it is generally best to use both. We suggest that you pay more attention to this type of comma use as you write in order to make it a more conscious choice. We also suggest that you try using various coordinating conjunctions to join sentences. “For,” “nor,” and “yet” are just as effective as “but,” “so,” “or,” and “and.”

Just to clarify, we should also note that joining two sentences together without any punctuation or linking word is considered unconventional:

Bill is a good student he studies all the time.

This sentence construction, in which two sentences have been joined without any punctuation or relationship words is known as a **run-on**. We prefer the term **fused sentences** as the term “run-on” tends to make people think that a sentence is simply too long. A run-on, or fused sentences, is simply two sentences that have been stuck together without any punctuation or words to explain their relationship.

So let’s review the ways we can connect two sentences:

With a semi-colon:

Bill is a good student; he studies all the time.

With a semi-colon and a conjunctive adverb:

Bill is a good student; however, he rarely studies.

With a comma and a coordinating conjunction:

Bill is a good student, and he studies all the time.

You can, of course, add other words to the sentence to connect them:

Bill is a good student because he studies all the time.

Bill is a good student who studies all the time.

What is happening in these last two cases is that the words that have been added actually change the second part of the sentences into incomplete ideas:

Because he studies all the time.

Who studies all the time.

These are no longer complete ideas and so they can simply be added to the sentence to become part of the predicate.

C. The last thing that commas do is to add non-essential, non-sentence information to a sentence:

Clearly, Bill, who is majoring in chemistry, is a good student, when he has time to study.

In the above, the actual sentence (the complete idea) is

Bill is a good student.

All of the other information—“clearly,” “who is majoring in chemistry,” and “when he has time to study”—is additional, non-essential information and could be taken off the sentence. This is a job that commas perform: they add non-essential, non-sentence information to a sentence. You

can test this by taking off the items that have been attached to the sentence with commas to see if the sentence still works.

The issue of whether or not the information you are adding to a sentence is essential or not can get a bit confusing, of course, and it takes a bit of practice to know whether or not to use the comma to set off that information. Look at the following examples:

My brother, who is in the army, never attended college.

My brother who is in the army never attended college.

In the first example, we are implying that the information “who is in college” is non-essential because we have surrounded it with commas. This means that the information is merely additional—we may only have one brother and so the information is not essential to identifying which brother we mean. In the second example, we have left off the commas, which implies that the phrase “who is in the army” is essential to identifying which brother we mean.

Making conscious choices about where you will use a comma takes some practice. Remember that commas are used to separate more than two items in a list, to join two sentences together with a coordinating conjunction, or to attach non-essential information to a sentence. Commas generally do not indicate a pause, as many people think.

Sentence—Directness, Clarity, and Sentence Logic

As with all languages, English has a sort of “default” construction for sentences. The standard construction is subject first, then verb, then direct object, complement, or subordinate clause. You will recognize this construction:

Our campus needs more recycling bins.

Bill, his friends, and everyone at the office held a going-away party for Bruce.

Problems with sentence construction often occur because the sentence has been written in some other order or that the actual “actor” and “action” in the sentence are not in the subject and predicate positions:

The proposal of the club was to institute a recycling program for the campus.

This is not a “bad” sentence, but it could be made better. In this example, the word that is the subject of the sentence is “proposal” and the verb is “was.” The sentence could be improved by moving the “actor” in the sentence, the club, into the subject position and by moving the action, the act of proposing the recycling program, into the verb position:

The club proposed a recycling program for the campus.

Part of the problem with these kinds of sentences is that verbs have often been turned into nouns: in the original sentence, the verb “to propose” has been turned into the noun “proposal.” Watch for these nouns that have been made out of verbs and see if you can use them, in their verb forms, as the actual verbs of your sentences:

First, the club made the argument for recycling on campus, then they had expectations for the participation of the students.

The key words—the nouns that have been made out of verbs—are “argument,” “expectations,” and “participation.” Look what happens when we transform those nouns back into the verbs of our sentence:

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First, the club argued for recycling on campus, then they expected the students to participate.

Sentences can also be made stronger by the use of more “active” verbs:

The campus is now leading recycling efforts in the community, and its students are recycling to help clean up the campus.

In this sentence, the verbs are “is” and “are.” We can move key action words into the verb positions of the sentence to make it stronger:

The campus now leads recycling efforts in the community, and its students recycle to help clean up the campus.

Another construction that inhibits sentence clarity is known as **passive voice**. In sentences that use passive voice, the actor in the sentence is transformed into the receiver of the action instead of the actor:

The recycling program is seen by a majority of the students as vital, but the inconvenience of the program has been pointed out by others.

Writers can recognize passive voice constructions by looking for verb constructions that use “is,” “are,” and other forms of the verb “to be,” or constructions that employ “has,” “have,” and other forms of the verb “to have.” Generally, sentences can be improved by moving the actor in the sentence into the subject position. This will generally eliminate the passive voice:

The majority of students see the recycling program as vital, but others point out the program’s inconvenience.

Most sentences, as with most punctuation and word choice problems, can be fixed by simply learning to read your work more carefully and to consider that almost all sentences can be made more effective with a little bit of consideration and work. Most of the time, you do not have to know what the problem is called in order to “fix” it, although having some basic idea about what makes sentences work well will help. The trick is to read your sentences out loud, listen to how they sound, identify the parts of the sentence that don’t work, and then fix them. At first, it may take a bit more time to review your own sentences this closely, but that is the essential advantage of writing: the ability to examine what you’ve written and to make better choices.

