

How to Read for Punctuation and Grammar Mistakes

Good editing makes bad writing good and good writing better. A key part of editing skill is proofreading, or reading written work for errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar. Mistakes in punctuation lead to run-on sentences that are hard to follow, while grammatical mistakes make your writing read poorly. Following are some approaches to reading for punctuation and grammar mistakes, and some common grammar and punctuation mistakes to look for.

Reading Effectively for Mistakes

Learn what punctuation and grammatical errors you make most often

Have someone else proofread and edit several samples of your writing, noting your errors.

Read your writing aloud

Do it slowly and carefully so you pick up the sounds of your words. Mistakes you may miss when you see them, you may pick up when you hear them.

Examine your work, sentence by sentence, last sentence to first

Reading your work from the end to the beginning forces you to see whether or not a sentence logically follows the one before it and makes grammar and punctuation mistakes stand out more.

Consult a dictionary

Look up words whose spelling or meaning you're unsure of, as well as the tenses and irregular forms of verbs.

Avoiding Common Punctuation Mistakes

End each sentence with a period

This also means knowing when to end a sentence, instead of creating a run-on sentence.

- A comma splice run-on sentence uses a comma to separate two independent clauses, as in "I played chess, the boy watched." Replace the comma with a semicolon, put a conjunction (such as "and," "while" or "as") after the comma or break the sentence into two separate sentences. ("I played chess. The boy watched.")
- A fused run-on sentence uses no punctuation between the independent clauses, as in "I played chess the boy watched." Correct the sentence the same way as a comma splice sentence.

Use commas correctly

Commas are used in the following ways:

- To separate introductory words or phrases from the rest of the sentence: "Frankly, I could care less."

- To join two independent clauses with a conjunction: "I shot the sheriff, but I did not shoot the deputy."
- To set off material that can be deleted without changing the sentence's meaning: "I was born in 1958, a very good year." (Material that changes the sentence's meaning if deleted is not set off, however.)
- To separate the items in a series of three or more. (Either "a, b and c" or "a, b, and c" is correct, depending on the source you consult.)

Use apostrophes for possessives or contractions, not plurals

- Use an apostrophe followed by "s" for the possessive form of any word that doesn't end in "s" and an apostrophe only if it does. (Exception: The possessive pronoun "its" uses no apostrophe.)

Avoiding Common Grammar Mistakes

Write complete sentences, not fragments

A complete sentence has a subject, a verb and at least 1 independent clause.

Place modifying words or phrases near the word they modify

- Wrong: "They saw the birds diving with binoculars."
- Right: "With binoculars, they saw the birds diving."

Keep the same verb tense throughout the sentence or passage

Shifting between present and past tense may confuse the reader.

Use plural subjects with plural verbs and singular subjects with singular verbs

The verb should agree with the subject of the sentence, not the subject of a prepositional phrase next to it.

Match the pronoun to the correct noun

Pronouns reduce the number of times a noun has to be repeated; make it clear which noun the pronoun refers to.

- Pronouns should match the number and gender of the nouns they refer to.
- If a pronoun could refer to more than 1 noun in the sentence, or if it isn't clear what the pronoun refers to, replace the pronoun with words that make the reference clear.

Tips

- In addition to a dictionary, you may also want to consult with a style guide, such as "The Elements of Style."

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