

## COMMON PROBLEMS IN WRITING MECHANICS AND STYLE

1. Misspelled words: Use dictionary (and/or spelling checker) and correct.
2. Typing error(s): Proofread more carefully and correct.
3. Contraction: Do not use contractions (e.g., "wasn't" or "isn't") in formal writing.
4. Capitalization incorrect
5. Wrong word or nonexistent word:  
Check a dictionary to be sure this word exists and what its meaning is.
6. Commas omitted or in wrong place:
  - Set off every parenthetical phrase (one that could be put into parentheses or removed from the sentence) by a pair of commas, one before and one after it.
  - Use a comma after each item in a sequence of three or more items, including the next-to-last. (E.g., "The Velociraptor likes apples, oranges, and pears.")
7. Possessives:
  - Insert an **apostrophe** when a noun is used as a possessive. (E.g., "the dog's ear," or "the girls' running shoes.")
  - **Do not use an apostrophe for "its"** as a possessive. (E.g., "The dog shook its head.") "It's" with an apostrophe is a contraction of "it is" and hence should not be used in formal writing.
8. Prepositions:
  - Reword to avoid a preposition at the end of the sentence. (Wrong: "That is an idea I have never thought about.")
  - Better: "That is an idea I have never considered," or "I have never thought about that idea.")
9. Dangling participle:  
Reword to eliminate an opening or closing phrase with no subject or the wrong one. When a sentence starts with a participle, the (understood) subject of the participle must be the same as the first word (subject) of the main clause that follows.  
  
(Wrong: "Flying through the trees, John watched the lovely bird." [This means that John was flying.] Correct usage: "Checking through her notes, Laquita decided to focus on the problem of deforestation.")

10. Adverbs vs. adjectives:

Use an adverb, not an adjective, to modify a verb.  
(Wrong: "Mary plays squash good." Right: "She plays it well.")

11. Pronoun:

Use "who/whom" when referring to people, "that/which" for others.

12. Hyphen with century:

- Insert a **hyphen** when you use a century term **to modify a noun**. (E.g., "important to seventeenth-century science.")
- If the century term stands alone, do not use a hyphen. (E.g., "in the fifth century.")

13. Verb tense:

- Use the past tense, not the present, for historical descriptions.
- Stay in the same tense throughout a given discussion.

14. Disagreement between singular and plural forms in verbs or pronouns

- Subject and verb.  
(E.g., "He and his dog walk," not "He and his dog walks.")
- Noun and pronoun.  
(Wrong: "The country went to war when an enemy attacked them." Right: ". . . when an enemy attacked it.")

15. Unclear meaning:

	Actions Needed
Undefined term	Make clear to your reader what <b>exact definition</b> you intend when using this term, which can be used in a variety of different ways.
Unclear reference	Re-write to indicate to whom or what this word refers. Be especially careful with "this" and "that."
Confusing wording	Re-write so as to communicate a clear point to your reader, so that no one can misunderstand you.
Idea cannot be followed because it is undeveloped	Explain and discuss this point more fully.
Awkward phrasing	Re-write to convert this lumpy, uncomfortable wording into a smoother statement.

## 16. Other Problems

	Actions Needed
Wordiness	Eliminate <b>unnecessary language</b> ; see how briefly you can express this point. [Rule of <b>Economy</b> ]
Repetition of ideas/information	Do not state the same point twice. Discuss each idea or topic fully in one part of your paper, then move on; delete unnecessary repetition.
Repetitious wording	<b>Vary</b> your wording to add interest, rather than using the same terms or phrases several times within a few paragraphs, as you have done here. [Rule of <b>Variety</b> ]
Indirect opening phrase	Re-word for a more vigorous effect, eliminating roundabout or vague opening phrases like "there is/are/was/were" or "it seems that". [Rule of <b>Clarity</b> ]
Parallel wording	When using the constructions "both . . . and" or "not only . . . also," use the same grammatical form after each of those terms. That is, the word or phrase immediately following both terms must be a subject, a verb, or a prepositional phrase. (Wrong: "Naboru likes both dancing and a quiet evening at home." Right: "Naboru likes both dancing and having a quiet evening at home.") [Rule of <b>Correspondence</b> ]
Passive voice	Re-write to avoid passive wordings, which are often imprecise, wordy, and/or wimpy; further, they seldom say who committed the action. (E.g., "Many orders were issued.") Use the active voice to achieve a more direct and forceful statement. (E.g., "The Queen Mother of Benin issued many orders.")
Incomplete sentence	Reword this phrase so that it becomes <b>a full sentence</b> , with a subject and a main verb. [Rule of <b>Completeness</b> ]
Overly broad generalization	Stick to the <b>evidence</b> you have before you, that you can defend effectively.
Run-on sentence	Do not join two separate sentences by a comma. To solve this problem, either: (1) add a <b>conjunction</b> (e.g., "and," "but," "or"); (2) substitute a <b>semi-colon</b> for the comma; or (3) <b>divide</b> it into two sentences using a period in the middle.