

“The Gold Sheet”

A GUIDE TO AVOIDING COMMON WRITING ERRORS

Explained below are some of the chronic errors that students make every term in every course. If you can learn to avoid only these pitfalls, your writing will be much better.

A. Grammar

1. A **pronoun** replaces a specific noun, its *antecedent*, to which it refers by agreeing in person, number, and gender. Thus *John* must be replaced by a third person, singular, masculine pronoun: *he*, *him*, or *his*.

a. **Vague antecedent.** *Slavery was immoral. This contributed to the Confederate defeat.* In the sample, “This” has no clear noun antecedent and therefore is incorrect. To correct, turn “This” into an adjective: *This immorality contributed to the Confederate defeat.*

b. **Wrong number.** *The Ku Klux Klan hated black people. They wore sheets at night.* Here the second sentence says that black people wore sheets. Collective nouns such as *team*, *army*, and *government* are singular in American usage and replaced by singular pronouns. Correct: *The Klansmen wore sheets at night.*

2. A **verb** is the word of action, status, or location: *jumped*, *was*, and *remained*.

a. **Split infinitive.** *He wanted to fully understand.* Some teachers regard this point as pedantic, but literate people keep both parts of the infinitive together in speech and in writing. Correct: *He wanted to understand fully.* or *He wanted fully to understand.* (Note that there is a subtle difference of meaning between the two samples.) Likewise, don’t break up verb phrases: *You may also want to go for a swim.* Correct: *You also may want to go for a swim.*

b. **Passive voice used to hedge.** *The domino theory was developed in the 1950s.* Here the writer avoided telling who developed the domino theory, an unforgivable omission. You could use a “by” clause, but the active voice is much better: *The Eisenhower Administration developed the domino theory in the 1950s.* Note the corrected sentence is much livelier.

c. **Incorrect tense selection.** *Although the Tet Offensive smashes the Viet Cong in 1968, American public opinion will never again support the war.* The sample is silly. History is the record of the past, and should always be written in the past tense. Otherwise, as in this sample, you end up using the future tense “will never again support” for something that happened many years ago. Correct: *Although the Tet Offensive smashed the Viet Cong in 1968, American public opinion would never again support the war.* Note, however, that ideas expressed in the past and preserved in written form should be treated as if the writer were speaking today, regardless of when his or her work was written. For example, *In his landmark pamphlet “Common Sense,” Thomas Paine draws on Biblical imagery in his attack on monarchical forms of government.*

d. **Subjects and predicates.** Don’t separate the two by a non-restrictive clause or phrase. *Lincoln, during the worst war ever fought on the American continent, was a great leader.* Such a division creates confusion. Better: *During the worst war ever fought on the American continent, Lincoln was a great leader.*

3. Usage and Structure.

a. **Word usage.** Correct diction depends upon your using a dictionary to find the proper meanings. If you make the following two common errors, you probably make others, so use your dictionary. (i) *He had a large amount of troops.* Wrong, because “amount” is used only for things that cannot be counted, like sugar or water, while “number” is used for things that can be counted, like grains or gallons. So: *He had a large number of troops.* (ii) *The army could not control it’s soldiers.* Wrong, because “it’s” means “it is.” The possessive of “it” has no apostrophe: “its.” Correct is: *The army could not control its soldiers.* (Note also that “its” is used instead of “their.” See A1b, above, to get the point.)

b. **Improper parallels.** *To fight or going home were their choices.* Constructions on both sides of a conjunction—and, but, or, etc.—must be in the same form. Correct: *To fight or to go home were their choices.* or *Fighting or going home were their choices.* The same rule applies to nouns and all other parts of speech.

c. **Overlong sentences.** *I love my wife because she’s nice to me except on Friday night when I want to go to the movies, but she wants to go to a cocktail party, because she likes the Joneses whom I can’t stand because Mrs. Jones and I had an argument two years ago about where her son could play when my daughters weren’t home.* No human mind can keep track of such a thing. A good rule is to keep sentences limited to one main clause and no more than one subordinate clause. *I love my wife because she’s nice to me. Sometimes she doesn’t seem too nice to me. For example, on Friday nights, she often wants to go a party when I’d rather see a film.* Note the short sentences.

d. **Paragraph structure** helps the reader understand where you end one idea and begin the next one. A paragraph is a group of sentences which are connected by a common idea. When the idea changes, there must be a new paragraph. If you don’t use paragraphs, you can’t expect the reader to understand you.

e. **Main/Subordinate clauses.** Putting an idea at the end of the sentence emphasizes it. But if the later part is a subordinate clause, the emphasis is diminished. For example, *Richard was the king, but Henry had the support of all powerful elements.* Better: *Although Richard was the king, Henry had the support of all powerful elements.*

f. **Improper conjunctions.** Some words are never conjunctions, although they are frequently used so incorrectly. Two premier examples: *However, he never came here.* and *Also, Lincoln fired McClellan.* "However" and "also" are adverbs, and should not be used to begin a sentence. Correct: *On the other hand, he never came here.* and *Moreover, Lincoln fired McClellan.*

4. Punctuation.

a. **Quotation marks combined with other punctuation.** In American English, periods and commas are always placed *inside* quotation marks and colons and semi-colons *outside*. Question and exclamation marks are placed inside only if they are associated with the contents within the quotation marks, such as: "Oh, Calcutta!"

b. **Commas in a series.** For greater clarity, place a comma before the word "and" in a series unless the last two items in the series belong together. Examples: *The group included Jones, Simpson, and Wilson.* and *She collected firearms made by Colt, Winchester, and Smith and Wesson.*

B. Rhetoric

1. **Strive for an economy of prose.** Keep your writing simple, clear, and direct to achieve greatest potency. Use the fewest words possible to express your ideas. As Mark Twain put it, "Eschew surplusage."

2. **Avoid slang expressions and jargon,** which are usually inappropriate in formal academic writing.

3. **Red flag words** are those of quantity, such as *many, few, some, and several.* They must be followed by examples. *A few of Johnson's advisers opposed the bombing.* is something no thoughtful reader will take seriously. A good reader will always say, "OK, name them!" Correct: *A few of Johnson's advisers opposed the bombing. The head of the CIA, John McCone, for example, thought it would be useless.* When you use words of quantity, let a "red flag" pop up in your head: "Give examples, give examples."

4. **Rhetorical questions** make lousy arguments. *Why couldn't they see that the NLF had the support of the people?* may seem unanswerable to you. But if there is an answer, then the writer loses the argument: *Because reflexive anti-Communism made them blind to the popular sentiment.* Much better is an assertion: *None of them could see that the NLF had the support of the people.* followed, of course, by examples and explanations.

5. **Quotations.** (a) Avoid them unless they provide essential evidence or say something you can't say as well. You're better off paraphrasing, *i.e.*, using your own words to convey the idea. (b) If you must quote, limit the words to exactly what you need and no more. (c) Always introduce the quotation before using it. Without an introduction, *Never in the course of human history was so much owed by so many to so few.* could refer to the Internal Revenue Service. Correct: *As Winston Churchill said in 1941 when crediting the Royal Air Force with the salvation of Western Civilization from Hitler, "Never in the course..."*

C. Miscellany

1. **Identify foreign words** by *italicizing* or underlining them. For example: *The importance of the bushido ethic in Tokugawa Japan cannot be underestimated.* Proper nouns, such as names of people or places (*e.g.*, Ngo Dinh Diem, Nairobi), do not require this distinction. Abbreviations of most Latin expressions commonly used in academic writing (such as *ibid.*, *op. cit.*, *etc.*, *et al.*, *i.e.*, and *e.g.*) do, however.

2. **Save paper.** When handwriting, don't leave one side of the sheet blank. Think of the trees which gave their lives for the paper you use.

3. **Leave margins and double space.** I take considerable pains to make my comments on your papers a valuable part of your education. Leave me space to write them, please.

4. **Proofread.** There is almost always one paper where some student leaves out "not" or makes some other silly proofreading error. Look at it this way: (a) you're better off spending the last three minutes reading than writing, because 100% correct on 80% done is better than 50% correct on 90% done, by a *lot*; and (b) if you can't be bothered to read your own stuff, then why should I?