

Borough of Manhattan Community College

Editing:

A Mini-Manual for Writing Across the Curriculum

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Writing Across the Curriculum Committee, BMCC

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EDITING AND THE WRITING PROCESS

In English courses, many of you have learned to go through a process of *pre-writing* (discovering your ideas on a topic), *drafting*, *revising*, and *proofreading* or *editing* (self-correcting) in order to produce an effective response to a writing assignment.

If you are not familiar with this process, consult one of the texts listed on the last page of this mini-manual. All of them illustrate techniques of pre-writing to help you avoid the frustration of staring at a blank page or of making countless false starts. All stress the importance of being clear about what the assignment asks for. All give tips about how to revise by focusing, adding, eliminating, and rearranging the material in your draft. And all urge postponing concern with errors until the last stage of composing, *after* you've got a complete and well-shaped draft on paper, because premature worry about errors can block you from writing fully and in depth. Of course, if you notice a mistake while composing your paper, fix it on the spot. But the best procedure is to write and revise the whole assignment, paying attention to developing and organizing your ideas, and *then* to focus on correcting errors.

In short, devote major energy to the substance of the assignment – but be sure to leave yourself time to find and fix mistakes. The content of your writing may be good or excellent, but if it is hidden under a veil of errors, your instructor may not be able to appreciate the quality of your ideas. He or she may even penalize you for not handling grammar, spelling, and punctuation as a college student is expected to.

This mini-manual on editing will help you to identify and correct some of the most common surface errors. For more help on these and other features of writing and composition, see the texts and web-sites listed on the last two pages of this manual.

SENTENCE BOUNDARY ERRORS

For purposes of this mini-manual, a **sentence** is a group of words that (1) contains a subject-verb combination AND (2) can stand alone as a statement. Length doesn't matter. A sentence might contain only two words ("Dogs bark") or dozens. What matters is marking off the boundaries of the sentence correctly, with a capital at the beginning and a period, question mark, or exclamation point at the end.

There are three kinds of sentence-boundary errors: fragments, run-ons, and comma run-ons (often called comma splices).

FRAGMENTS A fragment occurs when a part of a sentence is set up as if it were a complete statement, with a capital letter and end punctuation. Experienced writers may use fragments deliberately, perhaps for emphasis, or for bulleted or numbered items, as in the lists below. But accidental fragments that serve no purpose have to be fixed.

Possible reasons for fragment errors

- You worry that a sentence is getting too long and thus chop off a piece of it to make a new sentence.
- You mistake a pause within a sentence for an end-of-sentence stop.

Examples of fragment errors

1. The company provides good benefits for its employees. Such as a medical plan, a dental plan, and paid maternity leave. [The "such as" group is the fragment.]
2. Many newsstand owners are immigrants. Who are willing to work very long hours to make a better life for themselves and their families. [The "who" group is the fragment – even though it is longer than the complete sentence that precedes.]
3. Serving as a juror in a civil or criminal trial may require not only learning unfamiliar facts and concepts. But also the ability to communicate and reach decisions in a group. [The "But" group is the fragment.]
4. In 2001, after a judge found that New York State had been systematically shortchanging the New York City school system. He ruled that the state must alter the way it funds public education. The state appealed. And the ruling was overturned. However, in Spring 2003, the original decision was reinstated, and the State must now find a way to give more money to NYC schools. [The first and fourth "sentences" are fragments. "The state appealed" is a complete sentence.]

How can you detect fragment errors? First, remember the reasons why fragments occur, especially the mistaken worry about length. Second, always read your writing aloud, not too quickly, and don't slide past the full stops; as you read, listen to hear if each full-stopped group of words actually is a sentence.

How to correct a fragment

You can correct a fragment in one of three ways: (1) attach the fragment to the sentence that comes before; (2) attach the fragment to the sentence that follows; (3) delete one or more words, or add one or more words, to convert the fragment into a complete sentence. In the following corrections, the fragments have been attached

either to the preceding sentence or to the following one. But sometimes adding or deleting words may be the best way to mend the error.

1. **The company provides good benefits for its employees, such as a medical plan, a dental plan, and paid maternity leave.**
2. **Many newsstand owners are immigrants who are trying to make a better life for themselves and their families.**
3. **A good juror is capable of serving impartially on trials that may require not only learning unfamiliar facts and concepts but also the ability to communicate and reach decisions in a group.**
4. **In 2001, after a judge found that New York State had been systematically shortchanging the New York City school system, he ruled that the state must alter the way it funds public education. The state appealed, and the ruling was overturned. However, in Spring 2003, the original decision was reinstated, and the State must now find a way to give more money to NYC schools.**

RUN-ONS A run-on occurs when two or more sentences are fused (run together) without any punctuation between them.

Possible reasons for run-on errors

- Haste or carelessness.
- The mistaken belief that since two (or more) sentences deal with the same idea, point, or person, they should not be separated.
- Fear that sentences will be too short or will sound choppy.

Examples of run-ons

1. **During the civil rights movement, Harry Belafonte enlisted dozens of celebrities to take part in a big concert in Alabama they performed outdoors on a makeshift stage made of coffins borrowed from a local undertaker.**
2. **It was below freezing there was a thin coating of ice on the road.**
3. **In November 2000, local authorities in Florida established a police presence at some polling places this intimidated many prospective voters.**

How can you detect run-ons? Probably the best way is to read your writing aloud, not too quickly, and listen for the place where one statement ends and another begins.

How to correct a run-on

- **Add a period between the run-on sentences.** This is the simplest way to correct a run-on. For instance, you could put a period after “Alabama” in example 1 above, after “freezing” in example 2, and after “polling places” in example 3 (and of course begin the new sentences with a capital). However, there are other ways of fixing run-ons that may be more effective, as listed below.

- **Add a semi-colon between the run-on sentences.** A semi-colon (;) can be used between two sentences that are closely related. It signals a “stop” while also indicating that you want the sentences to be read as closely connected. (Readers register the semi-colon stop as “lighter” than a full stop.) In run-on examples 1 and 3 above, the semi-colon would work, but it would not be effective in 2 even though it would technically cure the run-on. Note: do not begin the statement following the semi-colon with a capital unless the word after the semi-colon would normally be capitalized.

- **Add a comma and a short “joiner word” like *and*, *but*, or *so* at the point where the two sentences run together.** This solution will not work in all cases, but it is an option in some, especially if a period or semi-colon would make the writing sound choppy. For example, it would work in example 2: *It was below freezing, and there was a thin coating of ice on the road.* It would also work in example 3: *In November 2000, local authorities in Florida established a police presence at some polling places, and this intimidated many prospective voters.* But it would not be effective in example 1.

- **Change one of the sentences in the run-on into a dependent clause or a phrase preceded by a comma.** (A dependent clause is a group of words with a subject and verb but unable to stand alone as a sentence). Apply this solution, for instance, in example 3: *In November 2000, local authorities in Florida established a police presence at some polling place, which intimidated many prospective voters.* Or: *In November 2000, local authorities in Florida established a police presence at some polling places, thus intimidating many prospective voters.*

COMMA RUN-ONS (COMMA SPLICES) In the examples of corrected run-ons above, notice that a comma *alone* cannot fix a run-on. If you use a comma to fix a run-on, it must be coupled with a joiner-word, such as *and*, *but*, or *so*, or with a word like *who* or *which*. Using a comma alone to separate run-on sentences creates another error – a comma run-on (comma splice).

Possible reasons for the error: the same as for run-ons.

Examples of comma run-ons

1. College tuition can be very expensive, students may have little money left for books and supplies.
2. At one time Governor Pataki and former Mayor Giuliani had a tense relationship, this was because the mayor supported Mario Cuomo in 1996.
3. Universities these days are run like corporations and try to save on labor costs, thus they rely heavily on underpaid and exploited part-time faculty.
4. The roughly 6,000 languages on earth have a total of about 1,000 basic sound units, individual languages use only between 10 and 100 such units, the average is 40.

How to correct a comma run-on

Correct a comma run-on the same way you correct a run-on: (1) Replace the comma by a period or semi-colon, possibly with a connective like *therefore*, *in addition*, *furthermore*, *moreover*, *as a result*. (This option is not illustrated in the corrections below.) (2) Keep the comma and add a short joiner word like *and*, *but*, *or*, *so*, *yet*. (3) Change one of the sentences into a dependent clause or phrase. (4) Rephrase, or delete words, to change two sentences into one. Here are corrections of the error examples:

1. College tuition can be very expensive, so students may have little money left for books and supplies. [A joiner word is added after the comma; note that this also makes the relationship between ideas clearer.]

College tuition can be very expensive, Therefore, students may have little money left for books and supplies.

College tuition can be very expensive; therefore, students may have little money left for books and supplies.

College tuition can be so expensive that students may have little money left for books and supplies. [Rewording makes one sentence out of two.]

2. At one time Governor Pataki and former Mayor Giuliani had a tense relationship; this was because the mayor supported Mario Cuomo in 1996. [A semi-colon is used to divide the sentences while still making clear their close relationship. A period would also be correct, with a capital following, of course.]

At one time Governor Pataki and former Mayor Giuliani had a tense relationship because the mayor supported Mario Cuomo in 1996. [The second sentence is converted into a dependent clause.]

The tense relationship between Governor Pataki and former Mayor Giuliani was the result of the mayor's support for Mario Cuomo in 1996. [Rewording eliminates the run-on by making one sentence out of two.]

3. Universities these days are run like corporations and try to save on labor costs. Thus they rely heavily on underpaid and exploited part-time faculty. [A period replaces the comma.]

Universities these days are run like corporations and try to save all they can on labor costs; thus they rely heavily on underpaid and exploited part-time faculty. [A semi-colon replaces the comma.]

Universities these days are run like corporations and try to save all they can on labor costs by relying heavily on underpaid and exploited part-time faculty. [The sentences are rephrased to create a single sentence.]

3. The roughly 6,000 languages on earth have a total of about 1,000 basic sound units. Individual languages use only between 10 and 100 such units.

but the average is 40. [The first comma run-on is fixed by a period, the second by keeping the comma but adding a joiner word.]

The roughly 6,000 languages on earth have a total of about 1,000 basic sound units. Individual languages use only between 10 and 100 such units; however, the average is 40. [The first comma run-on is fixed by a period, the second with a semi-colon and a connective.]

The roughly 6,000 languages on earth have a total of about 1,000 basic sound units; individual languages use only between 10 and 100 such units, but the average is 40. [A variation on the corrections made in the preceding version.]

VERBS

There are two classes of verbs, regular and irregular. The irregular group is small but important, especially the three most common verbs, **to be**, **to have**, **to do**, which are used not only by themselves but also in forming tenses of other verbs. If you don't know the present and past of these three verbs "cold," you simply have to memorize them.

TO BE

TO HAVE

TO DO

Present

I am	we are	I have	we have	I do	we do
you are	you are	you have	you have	you do	you do
he/she/it is	they are	he/she/it has	they have	he/she/it does	they do

Past

I was	we were	I had	we had	I did	we did
you were	you were	you had	you had	you did	you did
he/she/it was	they were	he/she/it had	they had	he/she/it did	they did

Verb tenses

"Tense" refers to the time of the verb. In English, that basically means present, past, future, plus some special variations of these three main tenses. The texts listed on p. 13 of this mini-manual describe the various verb tenses and the circumstances when they are used. Here we give you only enough information to help you avoid the most basic errors.

Present tense All verbs, including the important irregular ones shown above, have an s marker on the he/she/it form in the present: I move, you move, he/she/it moves, we move, you move, they move. Learn the pattern with one regular verb such as "move" and you have learned the present tense of all verbs except the three very irregular ones shown above.

Past tense To signal the past, regular verbs add -ed: *I moved, you moved, he/she/it moved, we moved, you moved, they moved*. Irregular verbs – for example, “speak” or “run” – signal the past tense by a form change within the verb instead of an ending: *I spoke, you spoke, he/she/it spoke, we spoke, you spoke, they spoke; I ran, you ran, he/she/it ran, we ran, you ran, they ran*. The handbooks listed on p. 13 of this mini-manual contain lists of the most common irregular verbs in case you are not sure what the past forms are.

Common tense errors

1. Omitting the -ed ending. (*Yesterday the child walk for the first time.*
Correct: *walked*.)
2. Putting an -ed where it isn't needed, either in the past tense of an irregular verb or in the “to” form of any verb. Often this happens when a student is trying to overcome a tendency to omit -ed endings. (Examples of errors: *Mary spoked to her mother in Chicago this morning. She wanted to telled her about the baby's first step.* Correct: *...spoke... tell.*)
3. Jumping back and forth between present and past tense when meaning requires consistent use of one or the other. Notice the shifts in this set of sentences: *The bus arrives at the Marine boot camp on Parris Island, South Carolina, at 3 a.m. The recruits were groggy, confused. But after eleven weeks, they are licked into military shape by drill sergeants who had no pity for them.* Correct: either present tense throughout – *arrives, are, are, hav* – or past tense throughout – *arrived, were, were, had*.) **Note:** It is not always wrong to shift tenses but there must be a reason to do so.

Subject-verb agreement

The form of a verb is determined not only by tense but by its grammatical subject. To say a verb “agrees with” its subject means that the verb form corresponds with the “number” of the subject – singular or plural. The problem of subject-verb agreement arises in the present tense of the irregular verbs *to be*, *to have*, and *to do* and in the present tense of all other verbs, where the he/she/it form – a singular – has an -s ending. The most common error is to omit the -s on the he/she/it form, or to add it to the “they” form. Possibly the confusion occurs because of thinking the -s ending is only a pluralizer and belongs with the plural form (they), not the singular one (he/she/it). But -s isn't always a pluralizer: see the section on -s endings below.

The problem of agreement doesn't arise in the simple past tense because all the forms have the same ending. However, it can occur in the compound past tense called the “present perfect,” which is formed with the present tense of “have”: He *has drunk* too much beer, so his friends *have taken* his car keys away from him.

Sometimes the subject and its verb are not next to each other, as in this sentence: *The causes of war are complex*. Even though the word *war* is next to the verb, the subject of the verb is *causes*. A good way to check for subject-verb agreement is to locate the verb and to ask who or what performs the “action” of the verb. In the example sentence, who or what are complex? The causes. The plural “causes” requires plural “are.”

In short, watch out for subject-verb agreement in the present and present-perfect tenses, and make sure that your verb links with its actual subject, which may not be the word right next to the verb.

Examples of subject-verb agreement errors and how to correct them

1. Three factors to consider when choosing a college is cost, location, and size. [The subject is *factors*, which is plural (=they), not *college*, so the verb should be *are*: factors . . . are.]
2. An example of a religious cult are the Moonies, followers of Sun Myung Moon. [The subject is “example,” which is singular, so the verb should be *is*: example . . . is. *Are* would be correct if the sentence were turned around to make the Moonies the subject: The *Moonies*, followers of Sun Myung Moon, *are* an example of a cult.]
3. Your order have arrived. [“Order” is singular; the verb should be *has* arrived.]
4. Students who does writing assignments in many classes, not just English, will be better prepared for the CUNY Proficiency Exam than those who only takes classes with multiple-choice exams. [*Students who do . . . those who take . . .*]

S ENDINGS

Besides being used to mark the he/ she/ it form of the verb, s endings are used in three other ways.

1. **Pluralizing s.** This s is added in order to pluralize nouns: one boy/ two boys; a pen/ many pens; this grade/ these grades.

Note: Add *-es* to pluralize words that already end in s or in sh, ch, or x: guess/ guesses; brush/ brushes; church/ churches; box/ boxes.

Reminder: As you know, some English plurals are irregular and are not formed by adding *s*: child/ children; ox/ oxen; sheep/sheep.

2. **Possessive s, with an apostrophe.** One way of showing possession in English is by adding 's to the possessor-word: my mother's friend; the student's paper; the book's cover. (English also expresses possession by using “of”: the friend of my mother, the paper of the student, the cover of the book. Whether you use the possessive 's or an “of” phrase depends on context.)

If the possessor-word is a plural ending in s, put the apostrophe after the possessive *s*: Four students' papers were destroyed. The books' covers were ripped off.

3. **Contraction s, with an apostrophe.** In some cases, we can shorten the word *is* or *has* to 's: he's here (= he is here); she's strong (= she is strong); Ed's already left

(= Ed has already left); Mary's written him twice (= Mary has written him twice). In one case, the 's stands for us: Let's go (= Let us go). **Note:** (1) These contractions represent an informal style of expression that may be inappropriate for many forms of academic writing. Avoiding them will make your writing sound more professional. (2) Do not confuse "it's" (= it is) with the possessive form "its," which has no apostrophe. Here are some examples:

It's [=it has] been a long time since we met.

It's [=it is] clear in the syllabus that writing assignments comprise 40 percent of the term grade.

The dog wagged its tail [the tail belonging to the dog], showing contentment.

The company completely redesigned its headquarters [the headquarters belonging to the company].

PRONOUNS

Pronouns "stand for" or replace nouns: *I just heard a boy scream for help. He must be in trouble.* The pronoun *he* stands for, or refers to, *boy*. *Boy* is thus the pronoun's **referent** or **antecedent**. A pronoun should refer to a specific, stated antecedent.

How to use pronouns correctly

1. **Make the pronoun "agree with" its referent in number (singular or plural).**
The *judge* made *her* ruling. The *judges* will cast *their* votes soon. The *company* wanted to expand *its* market share.
2. **Don't use *they* or *their* to refer to a singular antecedent.** This error often occurs when the antecedent is an indefinite word like *anyone/anybody*, *everyone/everybody*, or a word such as *person* representing a typical member of a group.

Everyone needs to be concerned about *his or her* [not *their*] credit rating.
Each person should try to develop *his or her* [not *their*] own writing voice.

To avoid getting caught in a thicket of *he/she*, *him/her*, *his/her* pairs, cast your sentence in the plural so you can use plural pronouns: *People* need to be concerned about *their* credit rating.

3. **Avoid ambiguous references – that is, references which are unclear.** *Mary told Liz that she had to return the library book.* (Who has to return the book, Mary or Liz?) *To build on their success, the company owners began hiring new employees and developing new products; unfortunately they did not do well.* (Who or what did not do well – the owners? the employees? the products?) Avoid this kind of error by attentive proofreading, putting yourself in the shoes of your reader.
4. **Don't use *they* to refer to persons not specifically mentioned or to words that can not perform the action of the verb.**

Wrong: The *bank* said *they* would not approve the loan.

Right: The bank *officer* said *he* would not approve the loan. (Or: The bank refused to approve the loan.)

5. **Don't use "it" in constructions like "In the Constitution it says . . ."** Instead, write "The Constitution says . . ."

6. **Don't use a pronoun to repeat the subject of the verb.**

Wrong: The *author* of the course textbook chapter *he* has a different view.
[Delete *he* -- it isn't needed: The *author* . . . *has* . . .]

7. **Don't use a parenthesized pronoun because you're worried that the antecedent might not be clear.** Simply omit the pronoun and use the noun again. But if the antecedent noun is clear, there's no need to add the noun in parentheses after the pronoun.

Wrong: The editor told the reporters that they (the reporters) had made several factual errors in the election stories. [Delete (the reporters) – not needed because the referent of "they" is perfectly clear.]

The texts listed on the next page give more details about the various forms and uses of pronouns, especially when to use *I* or *me* and *who* or *whom*.

THERE, THEIR, THEY'RE

These commonly used words sound alike, and carelessness can cause you to make mistakes in using them even when you understand the differences in meaning. Such mistakes, like the confusion between "it's" and "its" discussed on pp. 10-11, usually do not interfere with meaning, but they can irritate a reader.

There occurs in the standard phrases "there is, there are," etc., and also refers to a place, as in "Put the book there." **Their** is the plural possessive: "At the signal, the students opened their exam booklets." **They're** is the contracted form of "they are": "If you want copies of my notes, they're in my top drawer." (See the caution about using contractions on p. 10, item 3, note 1.)

HELPFUL TEXTS

Slim, Brief, and Inexpensive

Ann Raimés, ***Pocket Keys for Writers*** (Houghton Mifflin, 2000). This slim text touches on all aspects of composing (except generating ideas) as well as on correctness and format. It also contains sections on using computers and the internet; special tips for ESL writers on such topics as verb forms and use of articles; and MLA and APA documentation formats for research or term papers.

Diana Hacker, ***A Pocket Style Manual: Clarity, Grammar, Punctuation and Mechanics, Documentation, Usage, Grammatical Terms***, 4th ed. (Bedford Books/St. Martins, 2004). This manual covers the same ground as the previous text except that it doesn't include material on composing. There is a special section for ESL writers.

Ann Raimés, ***Grammar Troublespots: An Editing Guide for Students***, 3rd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2004). As the title indicates, this is a book to help improve mastery of grammar. The book is especially helpful for ESL students, but many chapters are very useful for native speakers who need to master basics like subject-verb agreement or verb forms and tenses. Each chapter contains some exercises, with answers in the back of the book for self-help. The book does not cover issues related to essay writing or how to use quotations and cite sources.

Handbooks & Guides -- Very Useful but Fairly Expensive

Sylvan Barnet, Marcia Stubbs, and Pat Bellanca, ***The Practical Guide to Writing***, 8th ed. Addison Wesley/Longman, 2000.

Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors, ***The New St. Martin's Handbook***. Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2001.

Ann Raimés, ***Keys for Writers***, 4th ed. Houghton Mifflin, 2004.

Stephen Reid, ***Prentice-Hall Guide for College Writers***, 6th ed. Prentice-Hall, 2003.

Lynn Troyka, ***Simon & Schuster Handbook for Writers***, 7th ed. Simon & Schuster, 2004.

USEFUL WEBSITES

There are numerous online writing sites. Those below are among the most useful.

1. Cuny WriteSite

<http://writesite.cuny.edu>

An interactive “OWL” (online writing lab) that covers the writing process, writing-to-learn strategies, essay writing, grammar and style, and many other useful topics, with opportunities to apply what you learn.

2. Guide to Grammar and Writing (Capital Community College):

<http://ccc.commnet.edu/grammar>

3. Hunter College Reading and Writing Center

<http://rwc.hunter.cuny.edu/writing/on-line.html>

4. Northern Illinois University Writing Program:

<http://www.engl.niu.edu/comskills/main.html>

Click on “Editor’s Grammar and Mechanics.”

For help on using quotations, click “Quotes and Quotations.”

For help on other aspects of writing, click appropriate items on the Writing Program home page.

5. Purdue University Online Writing Lab

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/index.html>

In the second paragraph of the introductory material, click “Complete scroll-down list of our handouts,” OR click one of the specific categories.

For a fuller list of websites, go to the Online Writing Center Consortium, <http://owcc.colostate.edu/resources>, and click Writing Guides. They vary in usefulness and navigability.