Grammar Hot Spots

Addressing Common Grammar Problems from the World Around Us

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How this module was created

- Originally, these slides were delivered as a face-to-face workshop
- The examples, after the first slide, are from websites that collect grammar mistakes from the media (mostly newspapers)
- In the workshop, each slide unfolds step-by-step, not all at once, so everyone can have a chance to try to spot the problem, explain it, and then offer a solution
- Here, the answers are given right off, but you can try not to read ahead on each slide—see if you can identify the mistakes and come up with a correct version
Like all religions, Hinduism has many icons. Some universal such as the western crucifix, but in the world of Hinduism Vishnu remains an integral part of Hindu society.

Vishnu is seen as a preserver of world order, occupying many shapes. For example, a fish, a lion or anything that the Hindu lord desires.

A sentence contains a subject and a verb, and it expresses a complete thought. Imposters—a.k.a. “sentence fragments”—often have a subject and verb but are not complete enough to stand alone.

Correct answer: “sentence” #2 in each example is a fragment.
The elderly, who now can get a double personal exemption (an elderly couple gets four exemptions worth $1,080 per exemption) instead of only two.

Yes, this fragment needs a verb to go with the subject “The elderly.” But does the following fix work?

The elderly, who now get a double personal exemption (an elderly couple gets four exemptions worth $1,080 per exemption, instead of only two), would be abolished.

Tip: watch out for lots of words between the subject and verb, so that the subject gets lost or forgotten!

[So, in answer to the above: No, we do not want to abolish seniors!]

Correct: An elderly person gets two exemptions, each worth $1,080. This double exemption would be abolished.
Nannouk, a 10-week-old Spitz mix female will grow to be medium sized. Sterilization is mandatory for anyone wanting to take her.

This example is not a fragment, but it’s confusing and also amusing. Why?

Tip: use two commas to surround a parenthetical (removable) phrase.

And be sure to write clearly—who is doing what? Who must be sterilized?

Nannouk, a 10-week-old Spitz mix female, will grow to be medium sized. Anyone wanting to take her must provide for her sterilization.
What’s the (punctuation) problem here?

- The ladies of the church have cast off clothes of every kind, they can be seen in the church basement on Friday afternoons.

  Comma splice: A comma splice occurs when a comma is used to join two independent clauses. Some solutions: either divide the sentence into two sentences, use a semicolon, or add a conjunction (such as and or but).

  But what else makes the sentence above so confusing and comical?

  Why is the hyphen in “cast-off” important? What’s the rule there? And why should “they” be revised?

  Correct: The ladies of the church have every kind of cast-off clothes, which can be seen in the church basement on Friday afternoons.
Firefighters are often called upon to save lives. Occasionally, they must help begin lives such was the case yesterday when five Elyria firefighters gave birth to a baby girl.

Fused sentence (also called a “run-on”): sentences that are run together with no punctuation. Try reading your sentences out loud to catch these monsters.

But how else would you fix this biology-defying news report??

Firefighters are often called upon to save lives. Occasionally, they must help begin lives, as was the case when five Elyria firefighters helped a mother give birth to a baby girl.
TODAY’S QUESTION: Efforts to make English the official language is gaining strength throughout the US. What is your reaction?

Why do people make this common mistake (subject-verb agreement problems)? How can you avoid this error? Try picking out the verb (“is gaining”), and then ask which noun goes with it (“language” is not gaining strength).

Does the following example display the same problem? Or is it correct (but still misleading)?

The number of women with infants in the labour force has grown dramatically, up from 31 percent in 1976.

(“Has grown” is correct—the singular verb goes with the subject, which is “number.” But are these really young workers?)
TODAY, 4:00-6:00 pm, Senior High Youth Group: Meet at St John’s for election of officers, an excellent film and discussion of how we unintentionally enable others to use drugs and alcohol, worship and pizza.

Common problem: lack of parallel form or “parallelism”—items in a list should resemble each other in form.

For example, it’s “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” NOT “of the people, by the people, and serving the people”!

But, now, how can we fix that Youth Group announcement?

Meet at St John’s for worship, pizza, and election of officers. We’ll also see an excellent film and discuss how we unintentionally enable others to use drugs and alcohol.
We spent most of our time sitting on the back porch watching the cows playing Scrabble and reading. [Smart cows!]

---Add commas to divide the items in a list.

The number of women, with infants in the labour force, has grown dramatically, up from 31 percent in 1976.

---Incorrect: Don’t put commas around a phrase that is essential (it can’t be removed); take out the commas. Also, rearrange this sentence to clarify that it’s the moms who are working.

It takes many ingredients to make Burger King great but, the secret ingredient is our people.

---A comma is required between two independent clauses joined by a conjunction. Put the comma where a period could go.

Women with infants have joined the labour force in dramatically increasing numbers, up from 31 percent in 1976.
Mrs. Shirley Baxter, who went deer-hunting with her husband is very proud that she was able to shoot a fine buck as well as her husband.

Again, two commas must surround a parenthetical (removable) phrase—so add a comma after “husband.”

But how can we free Mrs. Baxter from suspicion of murder?

Correct: After deer-hunting with her husband, Mrs. Shirley Baxter is very proud that she, like Mr. Baxter, was able to shoot a fine buck.

In other words, she was as able as her husband to shoot a deer.

Tip: avoid confusion by keeping related phrases together, as we’ll see in the next slide.
Try to fix the following humorous news items, which all share the same problem (“misplaced modifiers”). Then see the next slide.

- The family lawyer will read the will tomorrow at the residence of Mr. Hannon, who died June 19 to accommodate his relatives.

- Organ donations from the living reached a record high last year, outnumbering donors who are dead for the first time.

- The burglar was about 30 years old, white, 5’10”, with wavy hair weighing about 150 pounds.
Some possible fixes for the previous slide’s problems

- Mr. Hannon died June 19. To accommodate his relatives, the family lawyer will read the will tomorrow at the Hannon residence.

- Organ donations from living donors reached a record high last year, for the first time outnumbering organs received from donors after they died.

- The burglar, about 30 years old, was white with wavy hair, 5’10” in height and weighing about 150 pounds.
Flying over the African landscape, the elephant herd looked magnificent.

[Flying elephants would be a sight!]

Dangling modifier: a phrase that describes or refers to something that should follow but is missing—so the phrase “dangles.”

Watch out for phrases at the beginnings of sentences that start with words ending in –ing or –ed. These phrases often need to refer to (or “modify”) the sentence’s subject. See the next slide.

Correct: “As we flew over the African landscape, the elephant herd looked magnificent” OR “Flying over the African landscape, we saw a magnificent herd of elephants.”
How to fix a dangling modifier

Despite its dismal record in human rights, the US House of Representatives has granted most favored nation status to China.

To whom does the first phrase refer? Some may ask who indeed has that dismal record? How can you make this clear?

Two ways to remove the dangling modifier:

Despite China’s dismal record in human rights, the US House of Representatives has granted the country most favored nation status.

Despite its dismal record in human rights, China has been granted most favored nation status by a vote of the US House of Representatives.

For more on who and whom, see the next slide.
UNIVERSITY PUBLIC WORSHIP, MEMORIAL CHURCH, Sunday, August 26, 10 am: “Whom do I say He is? Whom does he say I am?”

Use “who” when the individual is the subject, as in “I am.” Use “whom” when the individual is the object, including the object of a prepositional phrase, as in “to me.” The best test is to leave out words or rearrange the words:

So, in the case above, “Who is He, I said? Who am I, according to him?”

1. Who did they elect? Would you say, “They elected me” or “They elected I”? (So “Whom did they elect?” is right.)

2. Whom was elected? Would you say “Me was”? (So “Who was elected?” is right.)

Remember: I/he/she = the subject = who
me/him/her = the object = whom
Other problems with pronouns

- [From a form for the National Council of Teachers of English] I understand neither me, nor any colleagues I’ve recommended, are obligated to accept NCTE membership. [Yikes!]

Avoid these types of mistakes by writing more simply:
I understand that my colleagues and I are not obligated . . . OR
I understand than neither I, nor the colleagues I recommended, are . . .

- According to the police report, the vehicle apparently ran off Ketch Road and struck a mailbox as it attempted to get back on the road.

“It” and “this” and “they” are often “vague pronouns”—make sure what these words refer to is clear, or replace them!

Correct: The vehicle apparently ran off Ketch Road, and as it attempted to get back on the road, the car struck a mailbox.
Right after we finish a piece of writing, it’s often hard to spot errors (our minds correct for them). Try to wait at least a day, so that you can edit your work with a fresh eye.

Also, set up proofreading exchanges with friends or others in your classes.

Read your work aloud, or even read the sentences in reverse order—anything to help slow you down. This process makes it much easier to catch mistakes.
Ways to learn more about grammar and editing

- Make an appointment at The Writing Centre (http://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/twc/), come during our drop-in hours, or stop in to ask questions.

- Use Writing Centre handouts on grammar and editing:
  - http://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/twc/advice
  - http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/style-and-editing,
  - http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/english-as-a-second-language,

- Try the interactive exercises at Towson University Online Writing Support: http://www.towson.edu/ows/

- Check out the appealing help from Grammar Girl: http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com
Hope you enjoy becoming more expert in grammar and editing.

Help those around you—they’ll appreciate the tips!

We also welcome your feedback and suggestions:
https://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/booking/students/feedback_wcs.php