

The Writing Reference

This section serves as “the grammar handbook” for Stetson’s students. This section offers our students three advantages: it is tailored to the kinds of questions students usually have when they get here; it discusses the kinds of mistakes we find students most often make; and it offers links to more information easily available online. *Your professor may still want you to buy a supplemental handbook, so be sure to check your syllabus.*

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a sentence fragment, and how do I fix it?

A sentence fragment is an incomplete thought captured in an incomplete sentence; usually, either the subject or the predicate (the verb phrase) is missing. Because it’s an incomplete sentence and therefore an incomplete thought, it must be made complete, either by attaching it to the sentence immediately before or after it OR by adding the missing element. Here’s an example of a sentence fragment: *While running for President*. Because we don’t get the information about who is running for President—that is, because we’re missing a subject—the idea is incomplete and needs revision.

What are comma splices and run-ons, and how do I fix them?

A comma splice and a run-on sentence are both results of inaccurate punctuation between two independent clauses (or sentences). A comma splice happens when two sentences are linked together with a comma; a run-on is created when two sentences are run together with no punctuation between them at all. To fix them, identify where the two sentences meet and insert the appropriate punctuation, such as a semicolon, a colon, or a comma with a conjunction.

What is parallel structure used for, and how do I create it?

Parallel structure provides the writer and the reader with a sense of balance and arrangement, and as such it’s an invaluable tool for writers who need to explain or argue. Parallel structure sets two or more items together that are matched in verb tense or grammatical structure, such as the famous phrase *I came, I saw, I conquered* or *By the people, of the people, and for the people*. You can create parallel structures by looking for the places

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where two ideas, words, or phrases appear close to each other and then modifying them so that their forms match as closely as possible.

What are dangling structures, and how do I fix them?

A dangling modifier or participle *dangles* because it's missing a subject, so it's not clear where it attaches to the main idea of the sentence. For instance, in the sentence "after hiking all day, the campsite was a welcome place to rest," the reader has no idea who has been doing all that hiking. The introductory phrase—the participle—does not include a noun to refer to the people doing the hiking, so the reader is not sure where the phrase connects to the rest of the sentence. You can fix dangling phrases by ensuring that **any actions have someone in the sentence who is doing the act.** "After hiking all day, we saw the campsite as a welcome place to rest" or "After we'd hiked all day, the campsite was a welcome place to rest."

Can I start sentences with "there are" or "it is"?

Yes. But this sort of sentence opening is often wordy and overused, and many professors don't like this opening precisely because it is so often used. You can start sentences with these constructions when you're drawing attention to what happens after the be-verb: *It is with great sadness that we announce George Carlin's death.* Another example where the "there is" opening would work well is *There is no better way to express love than with flowers.* But you wouldn't want to write *It is a long time since the Civil War days.* The first two examples deliberately delay the really important element of the sentences: George Carlin's death and the best way to express love. The third example, however, uses "it is" just to take up space; there's no reason for it there.

What is passive voice, and when can I use it?

Passive voice refers to how sentence elements work together. We usually read sentences that say *X is doing Y.* In other words, X is the agent of the sentence, and X's activity is Y. The active sentence therefore moves along briskly and doesn't have to pause or slow down. A passive sentence, however, delays a bit: *Y was done by X.* X is still the agent, and the activity is still Y—but the reversal of the order puts the action first, rather than the agent. The delay effect is being caused by the passive voice. In some sentences, we don't get an actor at all: the classic example is *mistakes were made.* Or you could write *The Amendment was passed.* Because we aren't told who passed that Amendment, the agent is missing—and you've written a passive sentence.

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Specifically, you can identify a passive-voice sentence in three ways:

- ✓ The reversal of the agent-action relationship
- ✓ The use of “be” plus a past tense verb
- ✓ The missing or delayed agent

You can use passive-voice sentences when the agent of the sentence isn’t necessary or important: *The law was passed, and everyone was happy*. In this particular example, it doesn’t really matter who passed the law—what matters is that everyone was happy about it.

How formal do I have to be in college writing?

Students ask professors and tutors all the time whether they can use “I” in an essay, or whether it’s all right to write with contractions. The questions make sense, because the rules here are different, and the smart student asks when they aren’t sure. **The short answer is that your writing in college should be as formal—without sounding artificial—as your assignment.** A research project is considerably more formal than, say, a journal entry. Your assignment sheet and your professor are your best guides to how formal you should sound.

Will using a thesaurus make me sound better?

You can try this approach to “sounding better,” but it probably won’t work. We want you to increase your vocabulary by learning to incorporate words that you’re coming across in your studies, not by artificially adopting words that sound big or important. When you use words that you don’t really own, that aren’t really a part of your vocabulary, you sound stiff and awkward. Most professors will want you to sound like you, not like you swallowed a dictionary. Therefore, use a thesaurus only to find the word you’re looking for, not to find any word to use in a pinch. Often times, words may be synonyms in a thesaurus, but have different connotations that can completely change the meaning of the sentence if used. Because of this, it is important to either check with a peer, a tutor, or a professor whether or not the word is appropriate or avoid using words you do not have completely incorporated into your vocabulary already.

Will my spell check and grammar check be enough to catch errors?

No. Your spell check will catch words that it doesn’t recognize. That is its primary function, so you have to keep your eyes sharp. Your spell check will catch typos, but it will not tell you when the word itself is wrong—only if the word is spelled incorrectly. In other words, your spell checker will not tell you that you’re using the wrong “their” or the wrong “to.” However, it will catch you if you spell it “thier” or if you type “ot” instead of “to.”

argument, 9 research, 3 **citation**, 9 **revision**, 1 comma splice, 1, 6 run-on sentence, 1 grammar checker, 3 sentence fragment, 1 Parallel structure, 1 **source**, 8, 9, 10 passive-voice, 2 spell check, 3 **purpose**, 8, 10 **subject**, 1, 2 quotation marks, 7, 9, 10 thesaurus, 3

Your grammar checker may flag sentences as incorrect that are in fact correct. Don't rely on the checker to do your grammar work for you.

Can I start sentences with “and” or “but” or “because”?

Yes. The short explanation is that a lot of grammar rules we used to think of as “rules” are determined by the users of those rules, and when enough of those users change a rule, the rest of us follow. Starting sentences with “and” and “but” is an example of that kind of rule. Technically we would say “Can we start sentences with conjunctions?” and the answer would be “Sentences should never start with conjunctions.” But modern users have realized that starting sentences with “but” tends to add just a bit of emphasis to the sentence. “And” at the start of a sentence has a similar effect.

The longer answer is that starting sentences with “because” is often considered incorrect, although there's no grammatical fault at work. The real problem with starting a sentence with “Because” is the risk of leaving the thought incomplete. “Because it was red” is insufficient information for the reader, even though we often hear this phrasing in conversation. In writing, we'd usually see this kind of subordinate phrase following another one, for instance “The bull charged the matador's cape *because it was red.*” That sentence would be equally fine if it were written this way: “Because the matador's cape was red, the bull charged it.”

The guideline: When you start a sentence with “Because,” ensure you have a complete sentence to follow.

The Most Common Mistakes

At Stetson, we see the following common errors. This section should be your first stop to help you identify the mistakes you're most likely to be making.

1. Missing comma after introductory element

Problem: *It doesn't seem right but a lot of people still impose their choices on others.*
Problem: *If we don't do something about climate change we won't be able to survive the way we do now.*

If you read the first sentence out loud, you would naturally pause slightly after “right” and before “but.” The effect of the pause is to throw the emphasis on the clause “but a lot of people still impose their choices on others.” That effect is lost without proper punctuation. We can signal the important part of the sentence by putting it at the end of the sentence and separating it from the introductory part with a comma.

The fix is simple: first, identify the MAIN part of the sentence, the part that carries the most important idea. Then, insert a comma between that section and the introductory material that prefaces it. This rule holds in 99% of the sentences-with -introductory-element that you’re likely to be writing, so be sure to get into the habit of placing the comma properly. **Any time you lead into your main idea with an introductory clause, you should place a comma between the two.**

Example: *Although the energy crisis of the 1970s seemed bad, this crisis is far worse.*

2. Vague pronoun reference

In the following sentences, you should be able to sense a bit of uncertainty—not about the sentence’s meanings, since they’re fairly clear, but about how parts of the sentence relate to other parts. We need your writing to be very precise, and precision includes careful attention to word choice.

Problem: *Transmitting radio signals by satellite is a way of overcoming the problem of scarce airwaves and limiting how they are used.* (Vague: The “they” could refer to either the scarce airwaves or the radio signals.)

Problem: *The University adopted an F-forgiveness plan for students failing courses. This was a good idea.* (Vague: What is “this” referring to? It could mean the plan, or the fact that the University adopted it.)

The problem in both examples is a lack of specificity. When you use a pronoun to refer back to a noun, readers need to know precisely which noun you mean us to understand. (The noun you’re referring back to is known as the **antecedent**.) Every second counts when we’re reading your work, so it’s your job to make sure that your meaning is as clear as you can possibly make it.

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The fix is simple: When you're editing your work after revising it, look for every pronoun and ensure that it refers very clearly to a specific noun phrase in your sentences. You can try using your word program to search for replacing pronouns like "they," "it," "this," and so forth, to see whether you've gotten into the habit of using pronouns to refer to vague nouns. When you find pronouns whose antecedents aren't perfectly clear, your options are to replace them with specific nouns or to edit the sentence's punctuation and grammar.

Example: *Transmitting radio signals by satellite is a way of overcoming the problem of scarce airwaves and limiting how ~~they~~ the airwaves are used.* (replacing a vague pronoun with a specific noun)

Example: *The University adopted an F-forgiveness plan for students failing courses. ~~This~~ The new policy was a good idea* (replacing the vague pronoun with more specific nouns)

3. Comma splice

The comma splice sentence happens when students join together two independent clauses—sentences that could stand on their own -- with a comma rather than using a semicolon or a period.

Problem: *It never seems fair to me that some students get more financial aid, don't we all deserve as much assistance as we can get?*

Problem: *The Commons tries hard to provide the right kinds of food, sometimes they don't get it right.*

The fix is simple: You need to decide what the relationship is between the two independent clauses before you can decide the appropriate punctuation. If the sentences are related, with the second one amplifying or adding to the first, then you can use a semicolon. If the first sentence isn't really related to the second sentence, you can use a period. If what you want is a slight pause before the start of the second sentence, perhaps for emphasis, then a period is appropriate. Sometimes all you need to add is a conjunction (*but, and, or, and yet, for instance*).

Example: *It never seems fair to me that some students get more financial aid; I think all deserve as much assistance as we can get!*

Example: *The Commons tried hard to provide the right kinds of food, but sometimes they don't quite get it right.*

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4. Run On Sentences

Problem: *It never seems fair to me that some students get more financial aid we all deserve as much assistance as we can get.*

Run on sentences (also called fused sentences) are very similar to comma spliced sentences: they're composed of two independent clauses, but instead of being connected with a comma, the first sentence runs on into the second one.

The fix is simple: Identify where your two sentences meet and put in a semi colon, a period, or a conjunction to resolve the problem.

Example: *It never seems fair to me that some students get more financial aid; we all deserve as much assistance as we can get.*

5. Punctuation with quotation marks

Essential concepts:

- ✓ Quotation marks go around the quoted material, and only the quoted material.
- ✓ The ending punctuation of a quotation can stand in for the ending punctuation of your sentence, **but** you may have to move it.

Problem: *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times (73)."*

Correct: *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" (73).* (note placement of closing quotation marks)

Problem: *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." (73)*

Correct: *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" (73).* (note placement of ending period)

Problem: *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. (73)"*

Correct: *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" (73).* (note placement of ending quotation marks and period.)

6. Semicolons and Colons

There's nothing wrong with relying on commas and periods to deal with your sentences, but at the college writing level, we'd like to see more complexity in your ideas—and that complexity is often best conveyed by appropriately complex punctuation. If you don't already know how to use semicolons and colons, we think you should learn.

A semicolon is used in two ways: to link two complete sentences when the sentences are related, and to separate items in a complex list. For instance:

The dogs are barking; there must be someone in the street.

These two sentences are clearly in a cause/effect relationship: the dogs in the first clause are barking because of the person in the second clause. We understand the relationship without the semicolon, but the punctuation makes the relationship much clearer. In the next example, the semicolon separates items in a list.

What really screws up the environment is the combination of greenhouse gases; the lack of attention paid to the problem by the government; and the greed of the big oil companies.

We generally use a **semicolon** in a list set-up when the items in the list are more than one or two words. More often, we use a **colon** to introduce a list. Colons can also be used to set up an explanation or an amplification of what's on the left side of the colon. In other words, if the first sentence sets up a sort of expectation in the reader, a colon then offers information that fulfills that expectation. In this example sentence, the colon amplifies what's on the left with what's on the right:

The 2008 Presidential election was historically significant: for the first time, the top two candidates for the Democratic nomination were a white woman and a black man.

7. Ineffective quotation technique

Generally speaking, the essential technique for quoting has five parts: 1: **set up** for the quotation; 2: **introduce** the quotation; 3: **quote**; 4: **cite** the quotation; 5: **follow up** with why the quotation is significant to your point.

In the International Arctic Research Center pamphlet, *The Arctic Climate Impact Assessment* explains the impact global warming has on the Inuit people: “for Inuit...[global]

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warming is likely to disrupt or even destroy [the Inuit's] hunting and food-sharing culture as reduced sea ice causes the animals on which they depend to decline, become less accessible, and possibly become extinct" (ACIA 7). Global warming has certainly had an impact on the Inuit way of life. However, one can also claim that modernization by the Canadian government has played an even larger role in the destruction of this way of life.

The **set up** is the signal to the reader. In essence, it sets the stage or previews the quotation, drawing our attention to what's important about the quotation. Without the set up, the reader has to work just a bit harder to follow the point; with the set up, the reader knows what to look for, because it's already been shown to us.

The **introduction** of the quotation serves to tell the reader that the writer has a credible source and to make the smooth transition between the writer's words and the quotation. Finally, the introduction helps boost the writer's ethos: by telling us where the quotation comes from, we get a sense of that source's value to the writer. Phrases like "According to" and "As Holmes puts it in his book" serve the same purpose. Don't let voices speak when the reader doesn't know who they are.

We often see students "dropping" quotations into their paragraphs, which to readers feels abrupt and forced. When a quotation is dropped, the writer has forgotten to smooth its impact with an introductory phrase or transition of some sort. A "dropped" version of the Inuit paragraph above, for example, would look like this:

The International Arctic Research Center pamphlet, *The Arctic Climate Impact Assessment*, explains that global warming has had an impact on the Inuit people. "For Inuit...[global] warming is likely to disrupt or even destroy [the Inuit's] hunting and food-sharing culture, as reduced sea ice causes the animals on which they depend to decline, become less accessible, and possibly become extinct" (ACIA 7). However, one can also claim that modernization by the Canadian government has played an even larger role in the destruction of this way of life.

If we read this paragraph aloud, we can hear that the first sentence comes to a complete stop; the next sentence, the quotation, then starts with a jerk. The writer should work for smooth integration, which we accomplish by the use of transitions and introductory phrases between the "set up" sentence and the "quotation" sentence. The quotation itself is the core around which all the other parts are assembled. The quotation serves to support your argument; it doesn't make your argument or repeat it. Further, the quotation itself must be

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precise and exact: no changes allowed. Word for word, punctuation mark for punctuation mark, the quotation is exactly as it was found in the original source. We signal that the quotation is exact by using **quotation marks**.

The **citation** provides evidence to the reader of your source. The citation is frequently offered “in code” or in a form that doesn’t actually provide the source’s complete publication information; in this case, the reference to ACIA, because it is presented as an acronym, is momentarily unclear. Source citations like this serve as a brief reference, and the reader must then go to the Works Cited or Bibliography page to find out what the ACIA is, where the document was published, who published it, and when. In other words, the citation and the Works Cited page work together.

Finally, the **follow up step** in the technique of quoting allows the writer to explain to the reader why the quotation is important to the argument being made. Some professors call this move “connecting the dots”; it’s tempting to assume that the reader knows precisely what connection the writer is making between the quotation and the reason for the quotation, but that assumption would be wrong. The reader may well be able to figure it out; however, it’s the job of the writer to ensure that there are no problems in comprehension. Therefore, the follow up portion of the quotation technique allows the writer to connect the dots for the reader so that the reader gets the whole picture.

Using quotations that fit your sentences:

We allow two ways—and **only two ways**—to change what appears within the quotation marks. The first is a set of square brackets [] to indicate that some words have been altered to fit your sentence grammatically or to clarify meaning. Using the brackets **does not suggest that you may quote out of context or in any other way alter the meaning of the quotation**; they are simply the indicators that you have smoothed the way for the reader. For example:

“For Inuit...[global] warming is likely to disrupt or even destroy [the Inuit’s] hunting and food-sharing culture as reduced sea ice causes the animals on which they depend to decline, become less accessible, and possibly become extinct.”

In this case, the brackets tell us that “global” was not part of the original quotation but also that the context of the original is about global warming. The word has simply been added to clarify. The second set of brackets in this quotation, around “the Inuit’s” tells us that in the original, the pronoun was probably not specific enough; it might have been “they,” sufficiently vague so that the writer decided to minimize any confusion and simply use a specific noun rather than a pronoun.

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The second allowed method is the use of **ellipsis points**, which look like three dots: Ellipsis points serve to indicate to a reader that some words have been removed from the original quotation because they were not important to the writer's purpose. **Using ellipsis points does not in any way allow the writer to change the source's intent, however.** Rather, this technique allows the writer to, for instance, omit the middle part of a sentence when it is irrelevant to the point being made:

“for Inuit...[global] warming is likely to disrupt or even destroy [the Inuit's] hunting and food-sharing culture as reduced sea ice causes the animals on which they depend to decline, become less accessible, and possibly become extinct”