Library &
Information Services
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Academic Skills
Sgiliau Academaidd

Common writing errors

In this guide, you will find a discussion of some common writing errors, such as incorrect use of the apostrophe. Use the information here as you edit or proofread your work prior to submission. It will also be useful as you read through and consider feedback on your work.

Writing effectively

When you submit a piece of written work, one of the skills being assessed is your ability to write effectively. What does this mean? Writing effectively in the context of assessed work is about writing *clearly* and with *impact*. Writing clearly is about being precise in your expression – saying exactly what you mean in an uncluttered and snappy way. Ensuring your writing has impact is related to your expression, as well as your writing style and the structure of your work. Does it grab the attention of the reader? Does it reflect a high level of understanding of the topic and its most important issues?

Achieving clarity and impact requires sound knowledge and understanding of the basics of English grammar and an ability to use language to enhance meaning in your writing.

The aim of this guide is to set you on this path by highlighting some common writing (and grammatical) errors. (Please note, the following list provides only a sample of these mistakes).

Comma splice

The most common writing error in any piece of student work is the comma splice. A comma splice occurs where two sentences are inappropriately separated by a comma. Each of these sentences can (and usually should) stand on its own. For example:

'The programmer completed the task, he won a prestigious award.'

In this example, it would be appropriate to replace the comma with a full stop.

Run-on sentence

A run-on sentence includes at least two sentences joined together without any suitable punctuation or conjunction (words like *and*, *for* and *but*). For example:

'The programmer completed the task he won a prestigious award he earned lots of money.'

This sentence is difficult to understand because of its lack of punctuation and missing conjunctions.

Apostrophe

The apostrophe is the source of a great deal of confusion, but its governing principles are actually not difficult to understand. The apostrophe is used in (a) contractions or (b) to indicate the relationship of possession. Where it is used in (a) contractions, it indicates missing letters. For example:

won't = would not
couldn't = could not
I've = I have

For (b), possession, either an apostrophe on its own, or an apostrophe followed by an *s* is used. It is essential to know whether the person or object in possession of other 'thing' is singular or plural. If he, she or it is singular, an apostrophe with an *s* is added; for plural (if ending in an *s*), an apostrophe on its own is added. Compare the following examples:

The student's book (singular = one student)
The students' project (plural = lots of students)

There are some variations and exceptions; for these, have a look at one of the resources at the link below.

Its / it's

What's the difference between *its* and *it's*? They are frequently confused, but if you apply the guidance given above, the answer is simple. *It's* is a contraction, meaning *it is* (or, less commonly, *it has*). Therefore, if you are going to use *it's*, only do so when you intend to write *it is*. *Its* is used to indicate possession.

For more information on English grammar and language use, visit the 'Writing' section at http://study.cardiffmet.ac.uk/AcSkills/Pages/Writing.aspx.