

# Trouble-shooting: Twelve common grammatical errors in writing

by Peter Chapman<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Agreement (concord)

Neither of the following sentences is grammatically correct but one seems obviously more acceptable than the other. Do you agree?

My daughter do her homework after supper.  
The change in people's attitudes to drink-driving are encouraging.

The first sentence would be acceptable in Suffolk regional speech, for instance, but not in Standard English because the combination of a singular subject ('My daughter') and a plural verb ('do') does not work.

### Rules at work here:

Subject and verb should agree or 'match up' in number.  
It is the number of the head word in the subject noun phrase which determines the number of the verb.

All the forms of the verb 'to do' in the present tense are 'do' except for the third person singular, 'does'. So the correct version is:

My daughter does her homework after supper.

The second sentence is also unacceptable in Standard English because the subject and verb forms do not agree in number. The subject is singular ('change') but the verb is plural ('are encouraging'). The verb should be singular ('is encouraging') to match the subject. There is more chance of a mistake being made here because of the long noun phrase ('The change in people's attitudes to drink-driving') which is acting as the subject of the verb. This creates a distance between the head word of the noun phrase ('change') and the verb. Also the plural noun 'attitudes' is closer to the verb and may have made the writer think that the verb needed to be in the plural.

The rule then is that it is the number of the head word in the subject noun phrase which determines the number of the verb. For example:

The things you say to your boss seem a bit rude to me.

The head word 'things' needs the plural verb 'seem' (it seems, they seem) to achieve agreement.

Sometimes, however, the meaning of a subject can override its number. Compare, for example, the following pairs of sentences:

Five miles is a long way to walk.  
Law and order is important to this Government.

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<sup>1</sup> From: Chapman, P and Stott, R (2001) *Grammar and Writing* Harlow: Pearson Education



Five men are coming to mend the roof.  
Law and order are both important to this government.

In the first two sentences, the plural noun phrase is thought of as a single idea and should therefore have a singular verb, whereas in the second pair this is not the case.

Finally, there needs to be agreement in number between nouns or pronouns in the subject and the object expressions of a clause. For example,

My daughters do *their* homework after supper.  
*They* are going to be good doctors.  
We really must sort out our bookshelves.

Note that the grammatical principle of agreement can also be called concord.

## 2. Dangling participles

The following sentences consist of a non-finite clause and a main clause, but something has gone wrong in each of them:

Reading *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff never fails to make an impression.  
Walking along the river bank, the evening air gave us a relaxed and contented feeling.

These sentences are unsatisfactory because the implied subject of the nonfinite clause, 'Reading *Wuthering Heights*', 'Walking along the river bank', and the explicit subject of the main clauses do not match up, producing an effect of dislocated (and absurd) meaning. For instance, in the first sentence, it seems to be Heathcliff who is reading *Wuthering Heights*, and in the second, the evening air which is taking the walk! Check this for yourself.

**Rule at work here:**

Participles should be firmly attached to the main clause.

The participle (the '-ing' and '-ed' forms) is said to be 'dangling' because it is not firmly attached, grammatically, to the main clause. You can rectify such errors by checking that your non-finite clauses are attached to your main clause like this:

Reading *Wuthering Heights*, I was struck by the impressive character of Heathcliff.  
(Who was reading *Wuthering Heights*? I was.)  
Walking along the river bank, we were delighted by the relaxing evening air.  
(Who was walking along the river bank? We were.)

Here is another example from a student essay on Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr Strangelove*:

Released in 1964, during the heightened military aggression between America and Vietnam, Kubrick engages with the audience's fear of escalation towards nuclear war.

As it stands, the sentence sets up the implication that Kubrick was released in 1964, which is clearly nonsensical. Simply replace 'Kubrick' with 'Kubrick's film' and the sentence becomes grammatically well-formed and makes good sense.

Here are three more sentences with dangling participles in the non-finite clause. Work out what it would take to correct them:

Travelling to the theatre, the bus broke down.  
Reading my essay through, a number of mistakes needed correction.  
Studied with care, I find Shakespeare's *Hamlet* very interesting.

### 3. Faulty parallelism

In the following sentence grammatical consistency has been lost, with the result that the meaning is less clear than it might be. You will probably have to read the sentence at least twice to grasp the connection between its units and the overall meaning:

The politician's aims include winning the election, a national health programme and the education system.

'Parallelism' means using the same structure for units of meaning which have the same role in a sentence or clause.

**Rule at work here:**

Parallel grammatical units in formal writing should share the same grammatical structure

In the above sentence, the writer lists the politician's aims after the verb 'include' so each of these aims is acting as the object of the verb. Each needs to be expressed with the same structure. The first of the three aims stated is in the form of a non-finite clause ('winning the election'), so the following two aims should also be in this form if the sentence is going to make clear sense. (After all a politician's aim cannot be 'an education system' or 'the national health service'.) The corrected sentence might read;

The politician's aims include *winning* the election, *strengthening* the national health service and *improving* the education system.

What changes could be made to rectify the following unsatisfactory sentence? Here we are dealing not with a list but a contrast of ideas:

Some commentators are not so much opposed to capital punishment but they want to postpone it for a period of time.

The units in this structure ('Some commentators are not so much A but B') are not parallel; 'opposed to capital punishment' is not parallel to 'they want to postpone it'. There is nothing wrong with 'it' standing in for capital punishment in the second unit but the switch from the use of the -ed participle ('opposed') to pronoun and finite verb ('they want') is very awkward and grammatically incorrect. Here is an improvement in consistency and clarity:

Some commentators are not so much opposed to capital punishment as committed to postponing it for a period of time.

### 4. Incomplete sentences

Why is the second sentence in the following pair not well-formed?

Many people have to put up with hard tap water. For example, most of the South East and the West Midlands.

The second sentence contains an adverbial ('for example') and a lengthy noun phrase ('most of the South East and the West Midlands'), but there is no finite verb phrase which means that a most important clause element has been left out. 'Incomplete sentences' are those which lack the essential elements of a clause, usually either a subject element or a verb element.

**Rule at work here:**

Normally, every complete sentence in formal writing should have at least a subject element and a verb element.



To correct the sentence above we have to add a finite verb phrase and anything else that the verb requires such as an object if the verb takes an object:

For example, most of the residents of the South East and the West Midlands fall into this category.

This is quite a lengthy string of words containing several units of meaning, but nothing can disguise the fact that it is a non-finite clause ('putting' is a participle and therefore has no person, number or tense) and so the 'sentence' lacks a main clause to make completed meaning. Here are two ways of rectifying the mistake:

Putting enough water in the kettle early in the morning for several cups of tea makes a good start to the day.  
Putting enough water in the kettle early in the morning for several cups of tea is important if you are going to have a well-organised morning routine.

Awareness of the contrast between independent and dependent clauses and the essential elements of clauses will be a guard against producing incomplete sentences – or, if you inadvertently produce them, will ensure that you are able to see what has gone wrong.

## 5. Who/whom

What grammatical considerations affect the choice of 'who' or 'whom' in the following sentences?

The character who crosses the stage at this point is the male lead in the play.  
The character who I most identify with is Hamlet.

In speech 'who' would almost certainly be acceptable in both sentences. Also, 'that' could be used instead of 'who' in both sentences and 'who' can be left out in the second sentence but not the first. Try this out. This last feature gives us a clue to the grammatical difference between the two sentences which most people would say needs to be observed in formal writing.

**Rule at work here:**

'Who' is the subject position form and 'whom' is the object position form of the relative pronoun.

This can be demonstrated by asking: who crossed the stage? The character (subject) crossed the stage. Who do I identify with? I (subject) identify with Hamlet (object). The object position of the relative pronoun is 'whom'; so the second sentence needs to be changed to 'whom I identify with'.

The character whom I identify with is Hamlet.

Furthermore, to be fully formal in style, the preposition 'with' needs to be moved into line with the relative pronoun it complements:

The character with whom I identify is Hamlet.

This construction is common in formal writing: 'in whom', 'for whom', 'by whom', 'from whom', 'to whom' etc.

Here is a practical guideline: if 'who' is followed by a verb then it remains 'who' (subject position), but if it is followed by a noun or personal pronoun ('I', 'you', 'she', etc.) then 'whom' is preferred.

There are few people at the court in whom Hamlet can confide.  
The writer and critic to whom we all owe a debt of thanks is Virginia Woolf.  
The writer whom we all admire is Shakespeare.

## 6. Fewer/less

Are the following sentences acceptable?

I listen to less records now than I used to.  
You really ought to take less sugar in your tea.  
He made less mistakes than most people.

### Rule at work:

The rule here is that 'few/fewer/fewest' are the adjectives that match up with countable nouns and 'little/less/least' with non-countable nouns (e.g. money, sugar, milk).

So the answer is that the first and the third of these sentences need alteration to 'fewer records' and 'fewer mistakes'.

The same conclusion occurs with the superlative forms of 'little' and 'few' as in the following:

He is the one who makes the least mistakes.  
(‘fewest mistakes’ is correct because mistakes are countable)  
You should take the least notes possible at this meeting.  
(‘fewest notes’ is correct because notes are countable)

## 7. Apostrophes

Something is wrong in each of the following sentences:

1. Her shoe's are completely wet through.
2. He read's very fluently for a seven-year-old.
3. I do hope you find that its not too late.
4. It is the Councils responsibility to care for the elderly.
5. The banking system may need improving but it's value to the country is not in doubt.

Part of the reason why mistakes like these are made is that all words ending in 's' in speech sound the same (e.g. 'its' and 'it's'). But the final 's' in each of the above key words is making a different grammatical contribution to that word. The function of 's' in each sentence above is as follows:

1. The 's' here forms the plural of regular nouns like shoe, book, house etc. **No apostrophe is needed.**
2. The 's' here forms the third person singular of the present tense' of the verb. **No apostrophe is needed.**
3. The 's' is the remaining letter of the word 'is' when the words 'it' and 'is' are contracted in informal language. It should read 'it's too late'. **An apostrophe is needed.**
4. The 's' here should function to indicate a possessive: 'the Council's responsibility'. **An apostrophe is needed** to indicate the possessive.
5. The 's' here is the last letter of the possessive pronoun 'its' which is on a par with 'his', 'her', 'your', 'their' etc. and should not be confused with the contracted form 'it's' meaning 'it is'. **No apostrophe is needed.**



Awareness of whether a final's' is contributing to a plural form, a contracted form or a possessive form will tell you whether to use an apostrophe or not.

## 8. Comma splices

What is wrong with the use of commas in the following sentences?

In 1952 Japan's GNP was one third that of France, by the late 1970s it was larger than the GNPs of France and Britain combined.

The government was defeated, this led to an early election.

The term 'comma splice' refers to the use of a comma between two independent clauses. Commas cannot be used between independent clauses. The result is usually that the use of the comma suggests that the two independent clauses are not independent but in fact connected. 'Splice', then, means 'a join', but in this case a 'bad join' between independent clauses.

### Rule at work here:

There are three acceptable ways of marking the relationship between independent clauses: a full stop, a semi-colon or a coordinating conjunction.

So, you can usually fix the error by changing the comma to a full stop, making the two clauses into two separate sentences, or by changing the comma to a semi-colon. Or you can make one clause dependent.

Incorrect: I like this book, it is very funny.

Correct: I like this book. It is very funny.

(or) I like this book and it is very funny.

(or) I like this book; it is very funny.

(or) I like this book because it is very funny.

(or) Because it is very funny, I like this book.

Avoidance of comma splices depends on being aware of the difference between independent and dependent clauses.

## 9. Pronouns and male bias in writing

Most people these days accept that male bias in language should be avoided wherever possible. It is therefore understandable that there is a tendency for people to use the following constructions:

*The reader* quickly realises that *they* are being asked to consider some difficult issues.

*Anyone* who wishes to apply for the course should send *their* details to the course organiser.

*The customer* should ask *themselves* several questions.

In the first common mistake listed above, we pointed out that pronouns and nouns used in different clause elements need to agree. The problem in the above sentences is that, to avoid male bias, the writer has combined a singular pronoun or noun phrase with a plural possessive pronoun.

The reader (singular) ... they (plural)

Anyone (singular) ... their (plural)

The customer (singular) ... themselves (plural)

David Crystal states that such a strategy has become acceptable in informal but not in formal usage because 'it goes against the general practice of Standard English' (Crystal 1996: 157). So, how can we avoid male bias but still remain true to the principles of Standard English? There are a number of current options, none of them problem-free:

- Some academics write 'she' when traditionally 'he' would have been expected ('The reader quickly realises that she is being asked to consider some difficult questions'). This 'reverse discrimination' has not proved acceptable to everyone and remains unusual.
- Some writers invent a sex-neutral/gender-neutral pronoun to use where no distinction between men and women is intended. The new form 's/he' is in widespread use in writing but can only be used when the word order of a clause makes it possible. This would suit the first of the above sentences, but not the other two, for instance.
- Some writers use both third person singular pronouns 'he or she'/'he and she'. Many people find this formula acceptable.
- Many writers change the construction by making the initial noun or pronouns plural. For example:

*Readers* quickly realise that *they* are being asked to consider some difficult issues.  
*Those* who wish to apply for the course should send *their* details to the course organiser.

## 10. 'Neither is' ... or 'either are'

We used the word 'Neither' at the beginning of the first trouble-shooting section. The next feature of written language that we wish to draw your attention to is the grammar of that very word and others like it such as 'each', 'anybody' and 'none'. The problem they cause some people stems from uncertainty about whether they are singular or plural. Here are some examples of sentences in which these words have caused a confusion between singular and plural:

*Neither* John nor David *come* to class on Fridays.  
*Each* person must make sure that *they* arrive on time.  
*Anybody* who wishes to attend the meeting should sign *their* name on the list.  
*None* of the books I have read *are* relevant.

### Rule at work here:

Formal usage requires that each of the above lead words should be followed by verbs and pronouns in the singular. 'Anybody', 'neither', 'each' and 'none' are all singular forms.

This seems most obvious perhaps in the case of 'each' and least obvious in the case of 'none': 'each' seems logically to imply separate individuals, whereas 'none' seems to have a collective meaning. However, 'none' needs to be understood as 'not one' and so requires to be followed by singular verbs and pronouns. Formal usage therefore requires the following:

*Neither* John nor David *comes* to class on Fridays.  
*Each* person must make sure that *s/he* arrives on time.  
*Anybody* who wishes to attend the meeting should sign his or *her* name on the list.  
*None* of the books I have read *is* relevant.



## 11. Missing comma after a parenthesis

A parenthesis is a piece of information inserted into a sentence that is grammatically complete without it. This information can be marked off from the rest of the sentence by dashes, brackets or commas, although the most commonly used punctuation for the following kind of parenthesis is the comma:

John – the gardener's brother – felt strongly about delphiniums.

John (the gardener's brother) felt strongly about delphiniums.

*John, the gardener's brother, felt strongly about delphiniums.*

A common error in punctuation is to miss out the second of the two delineating commas, like this:

John, the gardener's brother felt strongly about delphiniums.

Missing out the comma (or dash or bracket) confuses the meaning of the sentence.

## 12. Misuse of commas in defining information

A final common punctuation error is one in which a piece of defining information is incorrectly separated off from the rest of the sentence by commas (i.e. as a parenthesis). Here is an example:

Dickens's final novel, *'The Mystery of Edwin Drood'*, was unfinished at his death.

Separating off *'The Mystery of Edwin Drood'* as a parenthesis implies that it is a *non-defining* piece of information that could be omitted from the sentence without altering the meaning. This would be the case if *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* were the only novel by Dickens. But in fact the title of the novel is essential to the sense of the sentence: it is *defining* information. The sentence should therefore read:

Dickens's final novel, *'The Mystery of Edwin Drood'*, was unfinished at his death.

This implies, correctly, that *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is one of several novels by Dickens, and it is specifically *this one* that was unfinished.

The following sentence is also correct:

Dickens's final novel, *'The Mystery of Edwin Drood'*, was unfinished at his death.

In this case, the addition of 'final' changes *'The Mystery of Edwin Drood'* into non-defining information (i.e. there was only one *final* novel). Removing it would not alter the meaning of the sentence. Hence it can be added as a parenthesis.

### Reference

Crystal, David (1996) *Rediscover Grammar*. Harlow: Longman