

COMMON PROBLEMS WITH GRAMMAR

1. Basic sentence structure. All a sentence needs to be complete is a subject and a verb. "He cries." is an actual complete sentence. Of course, sentences are typically much more complex than this, but if you pay attention to your subject and verb and can clearly identify each, then you're off to a good start.
2. Subject-verb agreement. If you can identify your subject and verb, then you should have no difficulty making sure they agree, in tense and in number.

Examples:

Each of the two teams were at their best. (was / its)

As the innings progressed, the teams play more competitively. (played)

3. Avoid passive tense. Typically the passive tense comes into our writing when we don't have the right subject at the start of a sentence.

Examples: The issue to be discussed by the candidates is social security.
(The candidates will discuss the issue of social security.)

The format that will be used for the debate is a town-meeting style.
(The debate will use a town-meeting style format.)

4. Short vs. long sentences. The longer your sentences, the more likely they will include grammatical errors. Sometimes we need long sentences, in which case proper punctuation makes all the difference. But often we can divide sentences into separate, shorter ones and, in doing so, prevent basic writing errors. Short sentences also help to avoid fragments (strings of words without appropriate grammatical structure, such as a sentence without a subject or verb).

Example: During the 2004 presidential debate the candidates discussed Iraq and Bush made the point that the war has made the world safer while Kerry took issue with the way the war is being carried out.
(During the presidential debate, the candidates discussed Iraq. Bush made the point that the war has made the world safer. Kerry took issue with the way the war is being carried out.)

5. Correct punctuation. Good writing depends on good punctuation. Most common writing errors occur when commas (and, to a lesser extent, semicolons and colons) are incorrectly used. An easy way to simplify things is to write in shorter sentences (replacing commas with periods at the end of a complete sentence). Otherwise, watch for common traps such as separating subjects and verbs with commas and inappropriately dividing up connecting phrases or "sidebars" with misplaced commas.

Examples: Sally, wanted to run for president. (No comma needed)
Sally, who wanted to run for president didn't have a chance.
(Sally, who wanted to run for president, didn't have a chance.)
In the final analysis Sally who wanted to run for president, didn't have a chance.
(In the final analysis, Sally, who wanted to run for president, didn't have a chance.)

Semicolons are only used when you want to connect two sentences for purposes of argument, logic, or commonality. Both fragments must be self-sufficient sentences. An example of correct usage: National security took center stage at the debate; both candidates talked almost exclusively about this issue.

Colons are used to introduce a long (sometimes separated) list or example, or to set a statement apart for dramatic reasons. Examples of correct usage are:
(If I had a full list that followed, that would be an example.)

The main points of each candidate's message were clear: education, education, education.