10 Common Grammar and Usage Mistakes made at Pomona College

Checking one’s writing for grammar mistakes is essential before turning in any paper. Making a grammatical mistake can detract from your writing and even change the meaning of your words. Taking a few minutes to catch any of these errors can be the difference between writing a good or excellent paper. The following ten errors were made by over 50% of students who took a grammar quiz given by Brian Fung, PO ’09 and Ana Mitchell, SC ’09, ENGL087F students in Fall 2012.

1. Who/whom
   Incorrect: Alex worried about who Tim would be partnered with in the competition. Correct: Alex worried about whom Tim would be partnered with in the competition. Deciding whether to use who or whom can be tricky. Use who or whoever with subject pronouns; use whom and whomever with object pronouns.
   One trick is to mentally rephrase the sentence using he or him. If using he makes more sense, go with who. If using him makes more sense, go with whom.

2. Compound sentences
   Incorrect: I like to go to basketball games, and go to restaurants. Correct: I like to go to basketball games and go to restaurants. Also correct: I like to go to basketball games, and I like to go to restaurants.
   Whenever you link two sentences with a conjunction, you must use a comma, semicolon, or end the first sentence with a period and begin the next with a capital. Do not use a comma when the two linked clauses cannot be split into two separate sentences.

3. Dangling modifiers
   Incorrect: Walking down the street, the sky was a beautiful blue. Correct: The sky was a beautiful blue while I was walking down the street.
   Students often make the mistake of adding modifiers that don’t describe anything. In the above example, did the sky walk down the street? No. It is important to reword sentences if modifiers have nothing to modify!

4. Ending with a proposition? Yes or no?
   Bad: This is the report about which I want to talk with you. Acceptable: This is the report I want to talk with you about. Better: I want to talk with you about this report.
   A common myth is that a preposition can never come at the end of a sentence. Although this is generally a good rule to follow, at times trying to avoid ending sentences with prepositions can make the sentence sound awkward or require unnecessary use of the passive voice. If possible, avoid ending sentences with prepositions, but only do so if the sentence is not more “awkward” because of the rephrasing.

5. Which vs that
   Correct: The letter that must be mailed by 5:00 is on Sara’s desk. Correct: The Clark letter, which is on Sara’s desk, must be mailed by 5:00. Although the distinction is slowly fading, that is used to introduce essential information (in what is called a restrictive clause), while which is used for additional, nonessential information (in what is called a nonrestrictive clause). Which clauses are set-aside in commas, while phrases using that are not.
6. MevsI
Incorrect: Let’s keep this secret just between you and I. Correct: Let’s keep this secret just between you and me. I is used when it represents the subject of the sentence. The pronoun me is used when it represents the object: something that is acted on or affected by the subject.

7. Words that are not words
Incorrect: I’m going to speak with her irregardless of what you say. Correct: I’m going to speak with her regardless of what you say. Very often students use words or phrases that are not really words at all or are not acceptable for use in academic writing. Some examples include: anyways, can’t hardly, can’t help but, irregardless, ain’t, in regards to, with regards to.

8. Using words incorrectly
Incorrect: Hopefully, we’ll finish the project on time. Correct: With hope, we’ll finish the project on time or “In a hopeful manner, we’ll finish the project on time.” As a result, we cannot use hopefully in this example. Another set of words that are often misused are “fewer” and “less.” Fewer is used to compare things you can count, and less for comparing things you can’t count.

9. Subject-verb agreement
Incorrect: The tray of cookies have fallen on the kitchen floor. Correct: The tray of cookies has fallen on the kitchen floor. Students often make the mistake of incorrect subject-verb agreement, particularly when deciding whether to use a singular or plural form of the verb. One way to avoid this mistake is to remove any prepositional phrases that come after the subject and then decide whether to use the singular or plural verb.

10. It’s okay to start sentences with but, and, or because
Although many people believe there is a “rule” against starting sentences with but, and, or because, this is not the case! Good writers do this all the time! Students in primary grades are taught this to prevent them from writing fragments. But as long as your sentence is a sentence and not a fragment, feel free to start sentences with but as much as you want!

Useful books on usage and grammar

References for grammar errors in this handout
1 Stilman 244-245. 2 Morenberg 132-133. 3 Thurman 114-115; Foley and Gordon 59. 4 Stilman 263-264. 5 Feierman 227. 6 Stilman 240
241. 7 Thurman 18; Feierman 21; Feierman 215. 8 Feierman 214; Foley and Gordon 111; Stilman 38. 9 Thurman 46. 10 Feierman 16.