
TWENTY MOST COMMON ERRORS FOUND IN STUDENT PAPERS

With Sentences Containing *Example Errors* and Corrections

(Listed in order of frequency of instructor marking, with most frequently marked at the top.)

- Wrong word:** Please *except* my apology.
Please accept my apology.
- Spelling:** We were happy to *recieve* your job position announcement.
We were happy to receive your job position announcement.
- Incomplete or missing documentation:** “Your ear for language is more reliable than your eye.”
“Your ear for language is more reliable than your eye” (Hortshoj 85).
- Mechanical error with quotation:** “Writing is a struggle against *silence* Carlos Fuentes asserts.
“Writing is a struggle against silence,” Carlos Fuentes asserts.
- Missing comma after an introductory element:** While I *typed my brother* used headphones to listen to music.
While I typed, my brother used headphones to listen to music.
- Missing word:** The writing *process more* complicated than most people think.
The writing process is more complicated than most people think.
- Unnecessary or missing capitalization:** Even expert writers need a book like *A writer’s resource*.
Even expert writers need a book like *A Writer’s Resource*.
- Vague pronoun reference** (it isn’t clear what a pronoun refers to, or it could refer to more than one thing)
Some students think their first draft is their last draft, *which* can cause frustration.
Some students think their first draft is their last draft, a belief that can cause frustration.
- Unnecessary or missing apostrophe** (including its/it’s): *Kershaws* pitching got better as the season went on.
Kershaw’s pitching got better as the season went on.
- Unnecessary comma:** Research has *found, that* procrastination is not an effective time-management strategy.
Research has found that procrastination is not an effective time-management strategy.
- Unnecessary shift in verb tense:** We learn things better when we *struggled* to learn them.
We learn things better when we struggle to learn them.
- Missing comma in a compound sentence:**
“You start out writing crap and thinking it’s good *stuff and* then gradually you get better at it.” –Octavia Butler
“You start out writing crap and thinking it’s good stuff, and then gradually you get better at it.” –Octavia Butler
- Faulty sentence structure:** It was hard for me to get started even though I’m glad I doing it.
Even though it was hard for me to get started, I’m glad I did.
- Comma splice:** Many students have a hard time when they start *college, it* becomes easier for them later.
Many students have a hard time when they start college, and it becomes easier for them later.
- Lack of pronoun-antecedent agreement** (a pronoun and the thing it refers to do not match):
A resilient person knows how to take care of themselves.
Resilient people know how to take care of themselves.
- Missing comma(s) with a non-essential element:**
Bird by Bird a book by Anne Lamott is an excellent source of encouragement for writers.
Bird by Bird, a book by Anne Lamott, is an excellent source of encouragement for writers.
- Sentence fragment:** I would rather be somewhere *quiet. If* I need to be able to think.
I would rather be somewhere quiet if I need to be able to think.
- Run-on sentence:** Most mistakes in English cannot be committed in *speech they* can only be made in writing.
Most mistakes in English cannot be committed in speech; they can only be made in writing.
- Poorly integrated quotation:** “Writing comes more easily if you have something to say” (Asch).
Sholem Asch might also support the practice of prewriting. According to Asch, “Writing comes more easily if you have something to say.”
- Unnecessary or missing hyphen:** This is a *newly-discovered* place.
This is a newly discovered place.

HOW TO REDUCE ERRORS IN YOUR WRITING

Has your instructor told you that you need to “work on your sentence-level errors”? Have you always felt nervous about grammar and punctuation? You are not alone! Here are some ideas that will help you reduce your writing errors.

WRITE FIRST AND EDIT LATER. The less you think about grammar while you are writing, the more fluent your writing will be and the fewer mistakes you will make. Give yourself permission to make mistakes and then go back to look for them later. This process will result in fewer mistakes than if you obsess about every little detail as you go.

GIVE YOURSELF TIME. You will notice much more if you wait, after you are done drafting, before you go back to edit.

PRINT YOUR PAPER OUT. No one knows why this makes it so much easier to see typos and other errors than when you look at your work on a screen, but it does. An extra step, sure, but well worth it.

READ YOUR WRITING OUT LOUD. Your ear can often hear more than your eye can see. Be sure to pay attention to where you say something different from what is on the page. If you find it difficult to notice the difference, have someone read along silently as you read out loud to keep track of where you change the wording.

READ YOUR WORK BACKWARDS. Start with the last sentence, then read the next-to-last sentence, and so on. Sometimes interrupting the flow between sentences will help you notice that there may be problems within sentences.

FIND SOMEONE WHO WILL HELP YOU LOOK OVER YOUR WRITING. Because you are so close to your own writing, a reader will always be able to see things that you cannot. This is why even professional writers use proofreaders!

READ MORE. READ WELL-WRITTEN PROSE. We learn language best through immersion. It may feel as if writing and speaking are the same, but they are really different—writing is a far more complicated and takes much longer to learn. The only way to immerse yourself in written language is to encounter it over and over on the page. If you do this, you will absorb the patterns of good writing much better than if you sit and try to memorize a bunch of rules. But watch out—if you only spend time reading unedited blogs and emails, you just might pick up bad habits that way too.

FOCUS ON ONE ERROR AT A TIME. If you know you have trouble with commas, once you know that the rest of your paper is revised the way you want it, go through your paper and just focus on that, without distracting yourself with other concerns. Then go through and check for spelling, and so on.

DON'T KNOW WHICH ERRORS TO FOCUS ON?

What errors have instructors pointed out in your work in the past? Use this space to take notes about any comments you can remember: _____

Has your instructor mentioned any errors that particularly bother them? Many instructors have pet peeves, which they will mention in assignment sheets or on syllabi. If they've taken time to mention certain errors, they are worth paying attention to. Nobody wants a grumpy reader grading their paper. If your instructor has singled out certain errors, make note of them here: _____

What errors do you worry about the most? If something makes you nervous, it's worth checking it out, even if just to reassure yourself that you've mastered a skill that you've been working on for a while. Write down your grammar or punctuation concerns here: _____

Not all errors are created equal! See the other side of this handout for a list of errors that are most frequently marked by instructors who are reading first-year student papers. Unless your instructor has told you otherwise, these are the errors that are likely to bother your instructor the most.