

WRITING RULES

KEY

Italics denotes the name of the rule so you can easily remember it.

Bold indicates the exact letter, word or phrase that makes the sentence correct or incorrect.

NOTE: “Essential” and “Nonessential” both illustrate correct uses of the rule. They do not substitute for “correct” and “incorrect.”

Additionally, I have included brief commentary after some of the more complex rules.

1. Every sentence must begin with a *capital letter*.
Incorrect: the dog ran into the house.
Correct: **T**he dog ran into the house.
2. Every sentence must end with a *punctuation mark*.
Incorrect: When did you call
Correct: When did you call?
3. *Proper nouns* must always be capitalized.
Incorrect: We stayed at the holiday inn.
Correct: We stayed at the **H**oliday **I**nn.
4. Never use contractions in professional writing.
Incorrect: Please **don't** lock the door.
Correct: Please do not lock the door.
This is one rule that people break the most.
5. There should be no *fragments* in your writing. A fragment is a statement that lacks either a subject or a verb, or that does not possess a self-contained idea.
6. Do not write *run-on* sentences. A run-on is two sentences that are incorrectly joined. When two sentences are combined with a comma (,) instead of a semicolon (;) or coordinating conjunction (and, but or), this is called a comma splice. Two sentences that are combined without any punctuation marks at all is called a run-on sentence.
Incorrect: I went to the store it was closed.
Correct: I went to the store, **but** it was closed.
I went to the store. **It** was closed.
I went to the store; it was closed.
7. All items in a *list* must be separated with a comma unless the list begins with a colon (:). In that case, the items in the list must be separated by a semicolon.
Incorrect: My mother enjoys cooking cleaning and singing.

- Correct: My mother enjoys cooking, cleaning and singing.
 Correct: My mother enjoys cooking, cleaning, and singing.
 Whether to place a comma before the conjunction (and, but, or) is a matter of choice. Some people do while others do not.
8. When more than one *adjective* is used to describe the same noun, a comma must be placed between each adjective (but not after the final adjective).
 Incorrect: The large brilliant sign hurt my eyes.
 Correct: The large, brilliant sign hurt my eyes.
 9. When a sentence begins with a *prepositional phrase/adverb clause/introductory element*, a comma must be placed immediately after it.
 Incorrect: In 1175 the first Muslim empire was established in India.
 Correct: In 1175, the first Muslim empire was established in India.
 Many people also break this rule—even authors and publishers!
 10. All subjects must *agree* with their verbs and vice versa.
 Incorrect: The child walk down the street.
 Correct: The child walks down the street.
 Incorrect: There is many good movies to see.
 Correct: There **are** many good movies to see.
 Incorrect: Tables and chairs is necessary in the classroom.
 Correct: Tables and chairs **are** necessary in the classroom.
 11. When combining two clauses with a *coordinating conjunction*, you must use a comma when both clauses are independent, and you must not use a comma when one of them is not.
 Incorrect: A moose wandered into town, and scared several kids.
 Correct: A moose wandered into town and scared several kids.
 Correct: A moose wandered into town, and **it** scared several kids.
 The clause “and scared several kids” is not a complete sentence by itself; therefore, since it is dependent on the rest of the sentence, it cannot stand by itself apart from the independent clause “A moose wandered into town.” This is why you cannot separate it with a comma. Because “it scared several kids” is a complete thought (it possesses a subject ‘it’ and a predicate ‘scared several kids’) you may use a comma before the conjunction ‘and’.
 12. *Transitional terms* (e.g. “furthermore” and “however”) must always be punctuated correctly. If the transitional term links two parts of the same sentence, it must be preceded by a semicolon and followed by a comma. If it links two separate sentences, it must be followed by a comma.
 Incorrect: I received an “A” on the test, however, it was not enough to pass the class.
 Correct: I received an “A” on the test; however, it was not enough to pass the class.
 Incorrect: In 1972, the Miami Dolphins won all their football games in their

- regular season. Furthermore they won all their playoff games.
Correct: Furthermore, they won all their playoff games.
This is another rule that is often disregarded.
13. Keep the *verbs* in a sentence in the same *tense* unless you have a reason for mixing tenses. In other words, do not shift tenses unless you must.
Incorrect: When I walk to the store, I bought some candy.
Correct: When I walk to the store, I **buy** some candy.
When I **walked** to the store, I **bought** some candy.
Incorrect: I visited Dublin which was the capital of Ireland.
Correct: I visited Dublin which **is** the capital of Ireland.
This rule can be extremely difficult to follow if you do not know your verb tenses.
14. You may use numbers in numerical form (i.e. 12, 390, 4,000,000) except when the number is less than 10 or when the number comes at the beginning of the sentence.
Incorrect: Grandpa has thirty lizards.
Correct: Grandpa has 30 lizards.
Incorrect: 20 dollars is all the money I have.
Correct: Twenty dollars is all the money I have.
Remember that the only exceptions are numbers less than 10!
15. Nouns and *pronouns* must *agree* in number.
Incorrect: The person who called did not leave their phone number.
Correct: The person who called did not leave **her** phone number.
Easily one of the least followed rule. One all-too-popular example: “When someone says that murder is wrong, they usually have some exceptions in mind like self defense.” I come across this mistake in nearly every piece of work that I edit. “Someone” is not comprised by multiple entities—it is a single person. You would not say “My mother...they,” would you? Of course not. “Someone” is the same way. Even in a gender-neutral age, it is at least grammatically correct to say “Someone...he (or she)” I have even seen “Someone...(s)he” to denote both sexes. “Someone...it” is also correct (even though ‘it’ is often considered derogatory when it indicates a human being).
16. Avoid using *vague pronouns* incorrectly.
Incorrect: My two favorite hobbies are skiing and fishing. **It** requires much skill.
Correct: My two favorite hobbies are skiing and fishing. Skiing requires much skill.
Correct: My two favorite hobbies are skiing and fishing. Both require much skill.
17. *Personal Pronouns* must be used in their correct form.
Incorrect: Frank and me saw the film.
Correct: Frank and **I** saw the film.
Incorrect: Frank gave I a gift.
Correct: Frank gave **me** a gift.

This rule is somewhat complex. The grammatical distinction between “I” and “me” is that “I” indicates the nominative case (subject) while “me” indicates the objective case (predicate). The common sense distinction is that you never use “I” after the verb and you never use “me” before the verb. If you are ever in doubt, isolate the conjunction and the other subject of the sentence. In the above example, “Frank and I/me saw the film.” Take out “Frank and” and you have “I/me saw the film.” Would you ever say “Me saw the film”? Never. So, of course, you say “I saw the film.” Insert the correct clause back into the sentence: “Frank and I saw the film” (notice how “I” is before the verb “saw”).

18. Remember to use *who*, *whom* and *that* correctly. If the pronoun functions as the subject of the sentence, use *who*. If it is a direct object or the object of a preposition, use *whom*. Only use *that* if it refers to a nonhuman thing.

Incorrect: The student that leant me the book is in my Biology class.

Correct: The student **who** leant me the book is in my Biology class.

Incorrect: To who does this book belong?

Correct: To **whom** does this book belong?

This is very similar to the previous rule. The word “who” indicates the subject while “whom” lies in the predicate. In other words, “who” is doing the action while “whom” is the recipient of the action. In the above example, “The student who leant me the book is in my Biology class,” the word “who” points to “student.” Since “student” is the subject (the one who is doing the lending), we use “who” here. In the second example, “whom” is inside a prepositional phrase. It will be difficult for you to follow this rule correctly if you have trouble identifying prepositional phrase or do not know the list of prepositions. If the second sentence was reworded to, “This book belongs to whom?” you can easily see that “whom” lies in the predicate even though it does not point to anyone (that’s what the speaker is trying to find out!)

19. Avoid using *dangling modifiers* in your writing.

Incorrect: While still a student, Microsoft recruited my sister for a job as a programmer.

Correct: While **my sister was** still a student, Microsoft recruited **her** for a job as a programmer.

The first sentence is incorrect because “Microsoft” refers to “student” (Microsoft is obviously not a student). In the English language, unless you specifically associate a modifier with its referent, the reader automatically assumes that the word in question refers to the closest possible word that precedes it. In the first sentence, the closest choice is student. In the second sentence, there is only one possible word for “her” to refer to (“sister”). Here is another example: “Even though Bill and Joe practice every day, he still makes mistakes.” Which one does “he” refer to? We do not know. Often, writers will say “the former” or “the latter” instead of “he” in cases like this because it informs the reader which person still makes mistakes.

20. Avoid using *misplaced modifiers* as well (especially *only*):
 Only God can create a tree.
 God **only** can create a tree.
 God can **only** create a tree.
 God can create **only** a tree.
The correct use of this sentence will depend on what you want to say.
21. Use commas with *unrestrictive clauses*, not with restrictive ones. An unrestrictive clause is one that is not essential to the rest of the sentence; a restrictive clause is.
Essential: All my roommates who went to the party were late for class.
Nonessential: All my roommates, who went to the party, were late for class.
Remember that both of these are correct uses. We use commas in sentences when the clause can be taken out of the sentence. In the second sentence, when we omit “who went to the party” the sentence “All my roommates were late for class” still makes sense (it is still a complete thought). Therefore, we use commas. There is no hard and fast rule for determining whether a clause is restrictive or unrestrictive. Therefore, this rule is difficult because you must look at the context to determine whether the clause is necessary to the sentence.
22. Use commas to set-off *appositives* that are not essential to the sentence. Leave essential appositives alone.
Essential: Shakespeare’s play *Macbeth* was recently made into a movie again.
Unessential: Dr. Gibson, a professor at my college, explained rational functions.
In these examples, “*Macbeth*” is vital to the sentence because if it was omitted, we would not know which of Shakespeare’s plays was being discussed! In the second sentence, it is understood that the reader knows who “Dr. Gibson” is.
23. Apostrophes that show *possession* are used depending on the noun. If the noun is singular, add ‘s. If the noun ends in “s,” then simply add the apostrophe.
Incorrect: Enrons collapse sent shock waves throughout the energy sector.
Correct: Enron’s collapse sent shock waves throughout the energy sector.
Incorrect: Judas favorite color is red.
Incorrect: Juda’s favorite color is red.
Incorrect: Judas’s favorite color is red.
Correct: Judas’ favorite color is red.
24. Remember to be consistent with *subject-verb agreement* and *apostrophes*:
A woman’s car (When a single woman owns a single car).
Several women’s car (Many women own the same car).
A woman’s cars (One woman owns several cars).
Many women’s cars (Each woman owns her own car).
25. *Apostrophes* are also used without showing possession. They are used in expressions of time or measure, as well as in the plurality of special terms:
Incorrect: Todays high temperature set a new record.

- Correct: Today’s high temperature set a new record.
 Incorrect: I made three As and two Bs last semester.
 Correct: I made three A’s and two B’s last semester.
 Notice that “Today,” “A” and “B” do not own anything (they do not show possession); yet, they are followed by an apostrophe. Again, apostrophes do not just show possession—they are used for other things as well.
26. Whenever you quote directly from a text in a paper, always use *quotation marks*. If you are just paraphrasing, then do not use quotation marks.
 Incorrect: According to Dr. Smith, there is absolutely no liberal bias in the media.
 Correct: According to Dr. Smith, “There is absolutely no liberal bias in the media.”
 Incorrect: The text book cites “roughly 10 different causes of lung cancer.”
 Correct: The text book cites roughly 10 different causes of lung cancer.
27. In professional writing, avoid using “take,” “make,” “get,” “go” and “have” as much as possible. This is because you can practically use these words in any context and because they each have many different meanings in the dictionary.
 Instead of: “In five minutes, I will take a break.”
 Use: “In five minutes, I will **relax**.”
 Instead of: “Last year, I made five dollars an hour.”
 Use: “Last year, I **earned** five dollars an hour.”
 Instead of: “As soon as you get this health plan, you will be fully covered!”
 Use: “As soon as you **begin** this health plan, you will be fully covered!”
 Instead of: “After work, I go to the store.”
 Use: “After work, I **walk** to the store.”
 Instead of: “These big companies have too many safeguards that protect them from unfavorable legislation.”
 Use: “These big companies **possess** too many safeguards that protect them from unfavorable legislation.”
28. The order of *punctuation marks and quotation marks* together varies depending on the punctuation mark. Commas and periods always go inside quotation marks (assuming that you are using American-style English). Semicolons and colons always go outside quotation marks. Question marks and exclamation points depend on the context:
 She asked me, “Do you like jazz?”
 What did you like about “Satin Doll”?
 Someone yelled, “Encore!”
 I want to hear “Autumn Leaves”!
 Incorrect: Don asked, “Do you want to play tennis”?
 Correct: Don asked, “Do you want to play tennis?”
 In the example, because the quotation contains the question, the question mark belongs inside the quotation marks.

29. A *semicolon* should be used to combine two sentences together only if there is some clear connection between the two, such as cause-and-effect, generalization-and-example and statement-and-comment.
Incorrect: Yesterday, the weather was nice; I have several autumn clothes.
Correct: My mother was sick yesterday; she is well today.
Writers use semicolons this way in order to smoothly connect their thoughts. It would be awkward to read “Yesterday, the weather was nice” and then to read in a separate sentence “I have several autumn clothes.” This is the way people write who are new to the language (foreign students) or are young native English speakers (aka elementary school children).
30. Sentences should have *parallel structure*. Not only should you remain in the same verb tense, but also the same form of the verb (-ed, -ing, etc).
Incorrect: I played ball and was singing a song.
Correct: I played ball and sang a song.
Incorrect: Mike loves to swim, bike and to walk.
Correct: Mike loves to swim, **to** bike and to walk.
Note: In the second example, the first sentence is technically correct. Often, advanced writers will omit the “to” (called the infinitive) after the first instance. Be forewarned that this should not be done by those who are not fully confident in their writing ability. It is much safer to include the infinitive after every verb in the set.
31. Normally, it is not a good idea to use *passive voice*. In passive voice, the object performs the action. Typically, the subject should perform the action as it does in active voice.
Passive Voice (normally incorrect): The door was shut by me.
Active Voice (normally correct): I shut the door.
You know that someone is speaking or writing in passive voice because helping verbs are present along with the regular or action verbs. Some of the helping verbs include “am,” “is,” “are,” “was,” “were” and “be.” Normally, in professional writing, we want to use active voice because it is more assertive. However, there are instances when passive voice is preferred. One example is when speaking in delicate situations such as negotiations or in diplomatic talks. In these situations, you want to appear humble rather than overbearing.
32. *Articles* must come before most nouns. There are two types of articles: definite and indefinite. “The” is definite; “a” and “an” are indefinite articles. Definite articles are used to refer to a specific thing, while indefinite articles refer to a general thing. Moreover, the indefinite article “a” is used to modify words that begin with a consonant; “an” is used for words that begin with a vowel.
Incorrect: I ate the banana yesterday.
Correct: I ate **a** banana yesterday.
Incorrect: Today, an dog that ran across the street.
Correct: Today, **a** dog ran across the street.