Micro-Skills

Correct English

1. Run-on sentences or fragments

2. Subject/verb or tense agreements

3. Correct verb form

4. Adverbs vs. adjectives

5. Pronoun agreement

6. Confusing pronoun use

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"Correct English" refers to writing complete, grammatically correct sentences. Problems occurring because of incorrect English are easy to fix when you know what to look for. Often these problems slip by unnoticed not because the writer doesn't know the proper usage but because of poor proofreading. You should be sure to proofread your documents carefully for all correct English issues.

Run-on sentences or fragments

Fragments

A sentence is often defined as a group of words consisting of at least one independent clause. But if you look up "independent clause," you'll often find it defined as "a group of words that can stand alone as a sentence," so this is not the most helpful definition. Instead, you should think of a sentence (or an independent clause) as a group of words expressing a complete thought.

A phrase or clause that cannot stand alone is a fragment:

- Until I learned about Nike's overseas business practices.

- Although I believe Sarbanes-Oxley was an important first step.

Notice that the fragments above don't express a complete thought. They contain a subject and a verb, but they still leave the reader wondering what the author is really talking about. The real problem is the first word in each sentence: "until" and "although." If those words were not present, then the sentences would be complete and correct. They would simply tell us that the speaker learned about Nike's overseas business practices and that the author believes in the

importance of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act. But the inclusion of "until" and "although" leads the reader to expect something more from these sentences, such as a description of what things were like before the writer learned about Nike's overseas business practices or what the writer's argument is against cash-based accounting. That expectation is never fulfilled; therefore, the sentences are fragments. (Fragments are also known as "dependent clauses"; they're dependent because they cannot stand alone.)

Revised Sentences:

> • I was a big fan of the "Just Do It" ad campaign, until I learned about Nike's overseas business practices.

> • Although I believe Sarbanes-Oxley was an important first step, the accounting profession still needs more oversight.

Look carefully at sentences that start with prepositions or conjunctions. See the Parts of Speech page for definitions of prepositions and conjunctions. Very often, complete sentences become fragments with the addition of one of these words. For instance, "I want a new job" is a complete sentence. "Because I want a new job" is a fragment; it leaves the reader without any information as to what happens because the writer wants a new job.

Sometimes you can make a fragment into a complete sentence just by taking out that meddlesome conjunction or preposition at its start. Sometimes you can do it by adding a few words of explanation, to express whatever meaning is missing.

You can also join the fragment to a neighboring sentence. Often, the meaning that is missing from a fragment is contained in a sentence just beside it. Join the fragment and the sentence with whatever punctuation or transition word is appropriate. Read the paragraph over to make sure that your new sentence isn't too long or awkward.

Run-on sentences

If your sentence expresses a complete thought, you should then check its punctuation. A complete sentence must have sufficient punctuation to separate its main ideas; if you do not include this punctuation, your sentence will very likely become a run-on.

A run-on sentence does not contain strong enough punctuation to show the relationship between the ideas in the sentence:

> • In the middle of the meeting Paul stood up and began shouting, this display terrified the visiting CEO who dove beneath his desk.

Notice that the sentence contains three main ideas: 1.) Paul stood up and began shouting; 2.) this display terrified the visiting CEO; 3.) who dove beneath his desk. It's fine for a sentence to

contain this many ideas, but it should also contain appropriate punctuation to separate and distinguish them from each other.

In this case, ideas 1.) and 2.) are independent clauses; they require a semicolon, or a comma and conjunction. Idea 3.) is a dependent clause, so it only requires a comma.

Revised sentence:

> • In the middle of the meeting, Paul stood up and began shouting; this display terrified the visiting CEO, who dove beneath his desk.

> • In the middle of the meeting, Paul stood up and began shouting. This display terrified the visiting CEO, who dove beneath his desk.

To pinpoint run-ons in your own writing, look carefully at the transition points in the sentence. Watch for important transition words— such as "and" or "however"— to see where punctuation may need to go. Decide which clauses in the sentence are independent (i.e., they could stand alone as complete sentences) and which ones are dependent (i.e., they would be fragments without some supporting material). Two independent clauses require a semicolon OR a conjunction and comma to join them. An independent clause joined to a dependent clause (i.e., a sentence fragment) can take a comma.

Sometimes it makes sense to chop a run-on sentence into two or even three shorter sentences. If you decide on this strategy, make sure that all of the shorter sentences are complete; they must be independent clauses. Read over the whole paragraph to make sure that you don't have a series of short sentences, which will seem choppy.

Subject/verb or tense agreements

Verbs are action words, and the subject of your sentence is the person or thing that performs an action. In English, verbs change their forms (also called "cases") according to the subject that is performing them. A subject and verb are said to "agree" when the form of the verb correctly matches the subject that is performing the action; if they don't match, they don't "agree." For example:

> • Subject and verb don't agree: I frequently walks to work.

> • Subject and verb agree: I frequently walk to work.

There are two important ways in which the subject and verb of a sentence must agree:

> • Person: First-person subjects (I, we) take first-person verbs. Third-person subjects (he, she, it, they) take third-person verbs. See the sample sentence above for an example of a subject and verb that do not agree in person.

• Number: Plural subjects take plural verbs. Singular subjects take singular verbs. For example, you cannot correctly write, "The windows is open," because "windows" is a plural subject, and "is" is a singular verb.

Most of the time, native speakers of English match their subjects and verbs without much effort. However, in some situations, making sure that subjects and verbs agree can be more difficult.

1. A compound subject joined by "and" takes a singular verb when the subject is considered to be a unit or a compound subject. A "compound subject" is a subject made up of two or more people or things. When two or more people or things are joined in the sentence by "and," and they are performing a single action, use a singular verb if the subject is considered to be a single unit.

Incorrect Usage:

• Research and Development are reviewing the plans right now. ("Research and Development" is a single department and is considered to be a single unit.)

Correct Usage:

•Research and Development is reviewing the plans right now.

2. A compound subject joined by "and" takes a singular verb when both parts of the subject are modified by "each" or "every." See above for an explanation of "compound subject." If both parts of the subject are preceded by the word "each" or the word "every," use a singular verb, because the words "each" and "every" refer to singular nouns whenever they are used. If only one part of the compound subject is preceded by one of these words, you must use a plural verb.

Incorrect Usage:

• Each employee and every manager are invited to our boring lecture.

Correct Usage:

• Each employee and every manager is invited to our boring lecture.

3. Compound subjects joined by "and" take a plural verb in all other cases. If you are writing about two entities performing a single action but still considering them as separate entities, you must use a plural verb. Likewise, if you don't have "each" or "every" in front of both parts of the subject, you must use a plural verb.

Incorrect Usage:

• Willie and Belinda has resigned over the Donutgate scandal.

• Is the computer and the photocopier both Hewlett-Packard?

Correct Usage:

• Willie and Belinda have resigned over the Donutgate scandal.

• Are the computer and the photocopier both Hewlett-Packard?

4. Compound subjects joined by "or" or "nor" take a singular verb when the subject next to the verb is considered singular. If the two parts of a compound subject are joined by "or" or "nor," check to see which part of the subject is closest to the verb. If this part of the subject is singular, you should use the singular verb.

Incorrect Usage:

• The file cabinets or the desk are the only place I ever put my keys.

Correct Usage:

• The file cabinets or the desk is the only place I ever put my keys.

5. Compound subjects joined by "or" or "nor" take a singular verb when both parts of the subject are singular. That means if the two parts of a compound subject are both singular, use the singular verb.

Incorrect Usage:

• The phone or the microwave are beeping; I can't tell which.

Correct Usage:

• The phone or the microwave is beeping; I can't tell which.

6. Compound subjects joined by "or" or "nor" take a plural verb when the subject next to the verb is considered plural. What this rule means: If the two parts of a compound subject are joined by "or" or "nor," check to see which part of the subject is closest to the verb. If this part of the subject is plural, you should use the plural verb.

Incorrect Usage:

• The desk or the file cabinets is the place to look.

Correct Usage:

• The desk or the file cabinets are the place to look.

7. Compound subjects joined by "or" or "nor" take a plural verb when both parts of the subject are plural. If the two parts of a compound subject are plural, use the plural verb.

Incorrect Usage:

• Neither the managers nor the union organizers is interested in going out for ice cream.

Correct Usage:

• Neither the managers nor the union organizers are interested in going out for ice cream.

8. Plural nouns used as the titles of courses or subject areas, or as measurements or units of quantity (dollars, pounds, inches) take a singular verb. What this means: Don't confuse plural nouns with compound nouns. Compound nouns involve two or more separate words, while plural nouns are a single word describing more than one noun. When a plural noun fits one of the descriptions above, it is considered to be a single unit. Use the singular verb in these cases.

Incorrect Usage:

• Fifty million dollars are a lot to spend on swizzle sticks.

• Economics 101 are really tough.

Correct Usage:

• Fifty million dollars is a lot to spend on swizzle sticks.

• Economics 101 is really tough.

9. Collective nouns take singular verbs when referring to the collective nature of the group; they take plural verbs when referring to individuals within the group. Collective nouns are nouns that describe a group of individuals. Examine sentences using collective nouns carefully. If the sentence emphasizes the identity of the group as a single unit, use the singular verb. If the sentence is speaking of individuals within the group, use the plural verb.

Incorrect Usage:

• The advisory council work hard. (In this case, the council is considered as a single unit; therefore, you should use the singular verb.)

• The advisory council is divided over the Donutgate scandal. (In this case, individual members of the council are being referred to; they disagree with each other. You should therefore use the plural verb.)

Correct Usage:

• The advisory council works hard.

• The advisory council are divided over the Donutgate scandal.

10. When describing the actions of a company or corporation or its management, use the singular verb. However, when describing the actions of people within the company, use the

plural verb. Companies and corporations are collective nouns. Most often, it is appropriate to consider the company as a single unit, and to use the singular verb to describe its actions. If you are writing of the actions of groups of individuals within the company, however, then you should use the plural verb form.

Incorrect Usage:

• Bander Inc. are instituting new employee-friendly policies.

• Management are studying all the ways to save more money.

• Managers at Bander Inc. is instituting new employee-friendly policies.

Correct Usage:

• Bander Inc. is instituting new employee-friendly policies.

• Management is studying all the ways to save more money.

• Managers at Bander Inc. are instituting new employee-friendly policies.

Correct verb form

Besides subject/verb confusions ("she read" instead of "she *reads*") and tense agreement ("Yesterday I go to the movies" instead of "Yesterday I *went* to the movies"), students sometimes make other miscellaneous mistakes with verbs. The most common issue is with incorrectly formed irregular verbs.

Incorrect Usage:

• The company builded another facility outside of town.

Correct Usage:

• The company built another facility outside of town.

Irregular verbs are inherently tricky, especially for non-native English speakers, so the best way to learn them is to use them! Making a personal list of irregular verbs and their correct forms helps, but using these words in everyday speaking and writing helps solidify these forms more effectively than studying.

Adverbs vs. adjectives

Adjectives are words that describe a noun; adverbs are words that describe, or modify, verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs. Don't confuse the two. Also, don't confuse "-er" and "est"

adjectives with the ones that take "more." For example, the correct usage is "kinder" or "kindest," not "more kind."

Incorrect Usage:

• The CEO travels frequent to Europe to drum up new business.

Correct Usage:

• The CEO travels frequently to Europe to drum up new business.

Pronoun agreement

Pronouns are words that take the place of nouns in a sentence. (For more information, see the Parts of Speech page.) There are many different pronouns, but all of them have specific uses, and you can't mix those uses up. Certain pronouns replace certain kinds of nouns, according to the noun's number and gender. Here are some examples of nouns and the pronouns that should replace them:

the errand boy (masculine, singular) = he

the errand girl (feminine, singular) = she

the company (neutral, singular) = it

the companies/errand boys/errand girls (any gender, plural) = they

Obviously, it's impossible to give a complete list of every noun and its appropriate pronoun, but you get the idea. When a pronoun correctly matches the noun it replaces in number and gender, the pronoun is said to "agree" with the noun. When a pronoun does not correctly match its noun, it does not agree.

If you use the wrong pronoun to replace a noun, your reader will have trouble deciphering your sentence. For example:

• Representatives of up-and-coming corporate conglomerate DandyCorp. say that she's a good investment.

Who's the "she" in this sentence? DandyCorp. is a company; therefore, the correct matching pronoun is "it." Mentally substitute "it" for "she," and watch the sentence fall into place.

There's a long-standing convention of referring to certain inanimate objects as "she," and in certain cases this is so well established that you may follow it in your writing (such as in the case of ships, for example). Be aware if you do so, however, that this practice is not gender-sensitive, and it may offend some readers. Also, avoid pronoun mismatching that springs from

colloquial or regional dialect, as in "She's going to up and rain on us by nightfall, I reckon." In this case, "she" is used in place of the more conventional "it," which takes the place of "the weather."

Here are some hints to help you navigate the perilous waters of pronoun agreements.

1. Know your pronoun cases. Just as verbs have different tenses, pronouns have different cases; they change their form according to their grammatical function in a sentence. Pronouns can be "nominative" (used as a subject: I, you); "possessive" (used to show ownership: mine, yours); "objective" (used as an object: me, you); or "reflexive" (referring back to the subject: myself, yourself.) It's less important that you remember these terms than that you understand how to use the different cases.

Incorrect Usage:

• The boss, he went to the supply cabinet, since no one else would do it.

• The ball hit Parvis and I both.

Correct Usage:

• The boss himself went to the supply cabinet, since no one else would do it.

• The ball hit Parvis and me both.

2. Be able to recognize indefinite pronouns and use them correctly. The most familiar pronouns are the "personal pronouns," like "I," "you," "he," "she," "we," and "they." However, there are also many "indefinite pronouns," which are used to refer to unspecified people or things in a sentence. Often, indefinite pronouns express an idea of quantity. Some examples of indefinite pronouns are: "all," "each," "most," "either," "several," "everybody," "nobody," "some," "many," "somebody," "someone," "such."

Incorrect Usage:

• We every got a tiny Christmas bonus.

• Either Jim, Ringo, or Lourdes will have to take a fall.

Correct Usage:

• We each got a tiny Christmas bonus.

• Either Jim or Ringo will have to take a fall.

• Jim, Ringo, or Lourdes will have to take a fall.

3. With verbs in gerund form, use a possessive pronoun. The "gerund" form of a verb looks like this: "being," "going," "accounting." When you want to place a pronoun in front of a verb in this form, use a possessive pronoun rather than an objective pronoun.

Incorrect Usage:

• Me going to the race tracks is becoming a problem in our relationship.

Correct Usage:

• My going to the race tracks is becoming a problem in our relationship.

Note: This rule does not hold when the pronoun follows a verb like "see," "hear," or "watch." In that case, use the objective form of the pronoun: "She sees me going to the race track every week."

4. Do not use the relative pronoun "that" to refer to a person. Relative pronouns are words like "that," "who," "whom," and "which." It's become fairly common to use "that" to refer to a person, but to do so is incorrect. Use the correct form of "who" instead.

Incorrect Usage:

• The advertising executive that bought me lunch is sitting right over there.

Correct Usage:

• The advertising executive who bought me lunch is sitting right over there.

5. Use the relative pronoun "who" as the subject of a sentence; use "whom" as the object. The subject of a sentence is the person or thing that performs an action; the object is the person or thing that receives an action. You should use "who" when you are describing someone who is doing something; use "whom" when you are describing someone who is having something done to him or her. (See the Troublesome Words and Phrases page for other tips on choosing "who" or "whom.")

Incorrect Usage:

• To who it may concern: (Is the "who" performing any action here? No—it's the object of the preposition "to"; therefore, it should be "whom.")

• Whom is the person responsible for this catastrophe? (Is the "whom" receiving an action here? No, it's the subject of the verb "is"; therefore, it should be "who.")

Correct Usage:

• To whom it may concern…

• Who is the person responsible for this catastrophe?

6. You should avoid using personal pronouns in formal essay writing; if you do use them, be sure that they agree. Personal pronouns like "I, you, we, us" are considered too casual for formal essay writing. You may, however, use them in informal essays or letters or when the

context of your writing calls for you to directly address your reader or make direct reference to yourself or your actions. If you choose to use "one" to replace "you," be sure to use "one" throughout. Don't switch to "you"—the two pronouns are not interchangeable.

Incorrect Usage:

• If one wants to get ahead in advertising, you must be ruthless.

Correct Usage:

• If one wants to get ahead in advertising, one must be ruthless.

7. Do not use the plural personal pronoun to refer to a singular, gendered noun. In order to avoid gender-specific language, many writers use the pronoun "they," when referring to a hypothetical singular noun, like "the applicant," or "the employee." While this is admirably intended, it's still bad grammar. However, your other choices are not much better. The best option is to rephrase the sentence, usually by making the singular noun plural. If this option isn't possible, you may use "he or she." It's awkward, but it makes sense grammatically. Avoid using slashes: "she/he" or "s/he." They're eye-catching and casual, and inappropriate for formal writing.

Incorrect Usage:

• The successful applicant will be hard-working and motivated, and they will have several years' experience with corner lemonade stands.

Correct Usage:

• Successful applicants will be hard-working and motivated, and they will have several years' experience with corner lemonade stands.

• Successful applicants will be hard-working and motivated, and will have several years' experience with corner lemonade stands.

• The successful applicant will be hard-working and motivated, and he or she will have several years' experience with corner lemonade stands.

8. Use the singular, neutral pronoun to refer to a company or corporation. It may be tempting to refer to a company in the plural, as "they," especially when you are describing some action that the company has performed. However, a company is a singular, gender-free entity and must be referred to as "it." You can use "they" when you want to refer more specifically to some group of individuals within the company, such as management or accountants. If you do so, be sure to name the individuals you're talking about.

Incorrect Usage:

• DandyCorp is in big trouble; if they don't do something quickly, they could be on the block in a few days.

Correct Usage:

• DandyCorp is in big trouble; if it doesn't do something quickly, it could be on the block in a few days.

• DandyCorp is in big trouble; if company owner Guy Rich doesn't do something quickly, the company could be on the block in a few days.

Confusing pronoun use

Pronouns become confusing when one pronoun can possibly refer to multiple objects or subjects. It is easier to commit this error when the subjects/objects are the same gender. Taking time to insert specificity into the sentence can prevent confusing pronoun use.

Incorrect:

• Danny and Brian used his skateboard to ride into town. (Who does the skateboard belong to? It could be Danny's, Brian's, or even another boy's.)

• I just sat down at my computer when I saw a spider on the screen, so I smashed it. (Did the narrator smash the computer or the spider?)

Correct

• Danny and Brian used Danny's skateboard to ride into down. OR Danny used his skateboard to take himself and Brian into town.

• I just sat down at my computer when I saw a spider on the screen, so I smashed the spider and cleaned the screen.

Parallel structures

A parallel structure refers to a series of phrases or clauses within a sentence; whenever you have such a series, you must make sure that all parts of it are consistent with one another, or parallel.

Here's an example of a sentence that uses parallel structure:

• This morning I have filed my taxes, painted my fingernails, and learned to play the kazoo.

Notice that the auxiliary verb "have" in the first phrase does not need to be repeated with each verb that follows in the parallel structure. If the structure is consistent, readers can mentally carry that "have" over to the other two clauses, and the whole sentence will make sense.

Parallel structures are a simple and elegant way of listing phrases in a sentence. They economize on words (you don't have to keep repeating "I have," for instance) and they communicate a great deal of information accurately and well.

Whenever one of the phrases or clauses in the sentence differs substantially from the others, the parallel structure is knocked off course. If this happens, the reader may become frustrated and confused from trying to piece together the true meaning of the words in the sentence. Here are some hints to help keep parallel structures together, so their meaning is clear and easy to understand.

1. Make sure that verbs are consistent throughout the parallel structure.

What this means: Verb tenses and forms are the most common culprits in off-course parallel structures. If your parallel structure employs the auxiliary verb "have" or "has," make sure that each verb in the structure agrees with that auxiliary. Be especially careful with irregular verbs, like "to be" and "to go."

Incorrect Usage:

• She has eaten her lunch, paid her bill, and went back to school for her 1:30 class. (Notice the shift in verb from "has eaten" and "has paid" to…"has went"? Clearly, this is the wrong form of the verb.)

Correct Usage:

• She has eaten her lunch, paid her bill, and gone back to school for her 1:30 class.

2. You should use articles EITHER with every item in a series, OR only with the first. Articles are words like "the," "an," "a." (See the Parts of Speech page for more information.) If your parallel structure includes articles, they should be repeated in front of every phrase or clause in the structure, or else dropped after the first phrase or clause.

Incorrect Usage:

• Do you want the goldenrod, the saffron, butter, daylily, or ochre copy paper?

Correct Usage:

• Do you want the goldenrod, the saffron, the butter, the daylily, or the ochre copy paper?

• Do you want the goldenrod, saffron, butter, daylily, or ochre copy paper?

3. Correlative conjunctions should be followed by the same grammatical structure. Correlative conjunctions are words like "both…and," "not only…but also," and "either…or." If you have these words in your sentence, you must be sure that the phrases or clauses that follow them are parallel.

Incorrect Usage:

• The visiting lecturer's talk was both a boring one and totally irrelevant.

• It's not a time for clear thinking but panic!

Correct Usage:

• The visiting lecturer's talk was both boring and totally irrelevant.

• It's not a time for clear thinking, but for panic!

4. Prepositions, like articles, should be the same for each item in the series. Prepositions are works like "on," "at," "before," "above," "below." (See the Parts of Speech page for more information.) If your parallel structure includes prepositions, they should be repeated in front of every noun in the structure, or else dropped after the first noun.

Incorrect Usage:

• Do you want to go to the store, at the movies, or to the park?

Correct Usage:

• Do you want to go to the store, to the movies, or to the park?

• Do you want to go to the store, the movies, or the park?