

**THE OSU LIMA WRITING  
CENTER PRESENTS**

**BASIC ENGLISH  
GRAMMAR AND  
MECHANICS**

**“I can already put sentences together. I don’t need to learn about grammar.”**

- While everyone learns basic sentence structure and grammar, a deep knowledge of the subject helps ensure that your language is both interesting and easy to understand. It also helps you to find deeper meanings in literary texts.
- Unfortunately, while many people have a basic knowledge of grammar, there are a few aspects of it that people commonly misuse. The most common of these that we will discuss are subject-verb agreement, sentence structure errors, tense shift, and wordiness.



# SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Subject-verb agreement is one of the most basic aspects of English grammar, and probably the most important. This sometimes gets confusing with longer sentences, but the basic principle is always the same:

*Singular subjects require singular verbs,  
and plural subjects require plural verbs.*

Ex: My friend **is** a teacher.

My sisters **are** nuclear physicists.

# SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

As already stated, this rule is constant. However, some sentences can be tricky. Let's try an example:

EX: The convict, as well as his accomplices, \_\_\_\_\_ going to prison.

What should be in the blank: “**is,**” or “**are?**”

# SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

EX: The convict, as well as his accomplices, **is** going to prison.

This might look strange, but remember our rule:  
*the verb must always match the subject.*

The subject of this sentence, “**convict,**” is singular, and so the correct verb must also be the singular “**is.**” Terms like “**as well as**” or “**together with**” are not like “**and,**” which would combine the two subjects.

# SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT: MORE EXAMPLES

Let's look at a few more somewhat tricky examples:

EX: Everyone \_\_\_\_\_ going home after the party.

EX: None of you **claim/claims** responsibility for the crime?

EX: Either of those choices \_\_\_\_\_ fine with me.

EX: Most of my friends, but not Max, **has/have** decided to come to the restaurant.

# SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT: MORE EXAMPLES

EX: Everyone **is** going home after the party.

The indefinite pronoun “**everyone**” is always singular, even though it seems to denote a group.

EX: None of you **claim/claims** responsibility for the crime?

“**None**” can be either singular or plural, unless there is something specifically addressing a number in the sentence.

EX: Either of those choices **\_\_\_\_\_** fine with me.

Though it refers to two things, “**either**” is always singular.

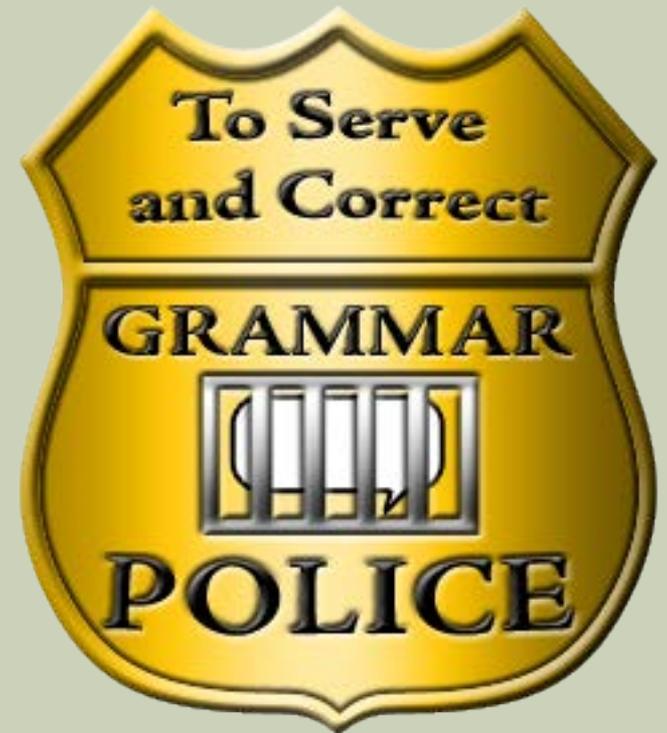
EX: Most of my friends, but not Max, **have** decided to come to the restaurant.

If a sentence addresses both a positive and negative subject, the verb should agree with the positive subject.

# SENTENCE STRUCTURE

There are three common offenders to proper sentence structure: **sentence fragments**, **comma splices**, and **run-on sentences**.

While they are all related, they differ in how they are incorrect, and the methods of fixing them are different.



# SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

A sentence fragment is more commonly known as an incomplete sentence. A fragment is generally pretty easy to identify. Let's look at some phrases: which are fragments, and why?

- A.** He left at 9:00 AM.
- B.** The orange cheetah.
- C.** Was swinging a club at me.
- D.** My cousin teaches economics on Tuesdays.

# SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

- A. He left at 9:00 AM.
- B. The orange cheetah.
- C. Was swinging a club at me.
- D. My cousin teaches economics on Tuesdays.

In sentence B, it was probably clear that we don't know what, exactly, this cheetah *did*. It needs a verb.

In sentence C, we have no idea *who* is swinging the club. It requires a subject.

It is for the same reasons that sentences A and D are correct; we know exactly what is happening, and who is doing it. A sentence is only complete if it conveys both of these things.

# COMMA SPLICES

A comma is used to connect an independent clause to a dependent clause. A **comma splice** occurs when a writer tries to use a comma to connect two independent clauses. For example, look at the following sentence:

EX: My family cooks together every night, we then eat everything we made together.

**What can we do to correct this comma splice?**

# COMMA SPLICES

There are several ways to fix comma splices, but the easiest is usually to use a **semi-colon**, which separates two independent clauses with a similar theme or idea.

EX: My family cooks together every night; we then eat everything we made together.

The second statement directly refers to the first, since it specifies what my family does after we cook. A semi-colon indicates this.

It is possible to separate these statements with a period as well, but this can also lead to short, choppy sentences if used too much. Similarly, you can separate them with a conjunction like “**and**,” but this can be a little too simple if overused (unless you’re trying to be Ernest Hemingway).

If you have trouble locating or fixing comma splices, look at your commas and determine if a period would fit better there. If it does, you can often just use a semi-colon.



**Protecting independent clauses from  
the tyranny of comma splices everywhere.**

# RUN-ON SENTENCES

A run-on sentence is similar to a comma splice because both are issues involving punctuation. However, whereas a comma splice is an issue of using the wrong punctuation mark in the wrong place, a run-on sentence happens when a writer links two independent clauses without using any punctuation at all. This makes it seem like it “runs on.” Here’s an example:

EX: The grocery store was really packed with people there must have been a big sale today.

How can we fix this?

# RUN-ON SENTENCES

There are a few more solutions here than with comma splices:

EX: The grocery store was really packed with people. There must have been a big sale today.

Separating the two clauses with a period is an option once again.

EX: The grocery store was really packed with people; there must have been a big sale today.

A semi-colon is always useful for breaking up two independent clauses.

EX: The grocery store was really packed with people, so there must have been a big sale today.

Adding the conjunction “so” will make this one complete sentence.

# TENSE SHIFT

When writing an academic essay, you will want to be consistent with the verb tense you use throughout the paper. There are slight exceptions to this, such as instances where you may refer to someone's change in character, for example. However, there is one general rule to keep in mind when writing:

*Never shift from one tense to another if the time frame for each action or state of being is the same.*

# TENSE SHIFT

This general rule probably seems a bit obvious. Consider the following example:

EX: We were seven miles from the shore. Suddenly, the sky turns dark.

This sentence features a tense shift. How can we fix it?



# TENSE SHIFT

EX: We were seven miles from the shore. Suddenly, the sky turned dark.

In this example, there is a very jarring shift in tense between the two sentences; it starts in the past, and then moves to the present. This violates our rule, because the two events (the speaker being out to sea and the sky turning dark) are happening during the same time frame.

# TENSE SHIFT

Even though this rule seems simple, most shifts in verb tense occur in longer pieces of writing, such as complex sentences or paragraphs. Let's try a few examples:

EX: Soon the firefighters pound on John's door, stomp in, and ask him to show them the fire, which was still dancing all over the room.

EX: The thirty passengers on the ship were whale watchers who hoped to catch a glimpse of the largest living mammals in their natural surroundings. After an hour, the first cry comes: "Sighting off the starboard bow!"

These examples have a shift in tense. How can we fix them?

# TENSE SHIFT

EX: Soon the firefighters pound on John's door, stomp in, and ask him to show them the fire, which **is** still dancing all over the room.

Since the fire is still dancing around the room when the firefighters enter, the sentence's tense should stay the same to reflect that this is all happening at once.

EX: The thirty passengers on the ship were whale watchers who hoped to catch a glimpse of the largest living mammals in their natural surroundings. After an hour, the first cry **came**:  
"Sighting off the starboard bow!"

Even though some time has passed between the two sentences, the second one still must have the same tense as the first. This is because, since there is no context, we must assume that both of these are still in the past; the first sentence just happened earlier.

# WORDINESS

Unlike the issues we've already discussed, wordiness is a problem that doesn't necessarily have one easy fix. It is really a problem that rises from other issues; many different things can make your writing too wordy, and each one can be fixed differently. However, it is important to remember one thing:

*Effective writing is concise and to the point.*

One of the primary things that might

cause a piece of writing to be overly wordy is the overuse of the passive voice, so that's what we'll focus on.



# ACTIVE/PASSIVE VOICE

In English, a sentence is considered **active** when the subject performs the action expressed in the verb:

EX: Laura **will present** her research at the conference.

A sentence is considered **passive** when the subject receives the action expressed by the verb. In other words, a sentence is passive if the **subject is acted upon**.

EX: Research **will be presented** by Laura at the conference.

One of these is probably more interesting to read than the other. Which one would you rather use in a paper? Why?

# ACTIVE/PASSIVE VOICE

Passive voice can also lead to some confusing or awkward sentences. Let's look at this **active** sentence:

EX: Watching a framed, mobile world through a car's windshield reminds me of watching a movie or TV.

Now let's look at it as a **passive** sentence.

EX: I am reminded of watching a movie or TV by watching a framed, mobile world through a car's windshield.

The second sentence is considerably more awkward than the first, and it is also a little more wordy.

# ACTIVE/PASSIVE VOICE

Locating instances of passive voice can sometimes be difficult, because sometimes it almost seems natural. It can also be difficult to identify the passive voice if a sentence is long or detailed. However, like every other topic we've talked about, there is an easy way to find the passive voice.

Look for forms of “to be,” or prepositions like “of” and “by,” and see if the sentence can be reordered to get rid of them.

Let's try one example:

EX: We were given free gifts by that guy.

How can we make this sentence active?

# ACTIVE/PASSIVE VOICE

EX: That guy gave us free gifts.

By taking out the form of “to be” in this sentence (“were”), we can rearrange it and make it much shorter.

It is important to note that passive voice is not *always* a bad thing. It can be useful when the subject in a situation is not important, and it is very common in the sciences because of this. However, it should still be used sparingly, and, even if you do use it, make sure that you avoid being more wordy than you need to be.

# ACTIVE/PASSIVE VOICE AND WORDINESS

Remember, when writing, **every word should carry its weight**. If it doesn't add to what you're trying to say, take it out. A lot of students look for ways to lengthen their papers, but if you choose a significant and interesting topic, you should have no difficulties meeting page requirements.

# FURTHER REFERENCE

No presentation can cover every single issue you might have when writing a paper, but that's okay. If you have any questions about the writing process, feel free to visit the Writing Center to meet with a writing consultant. You can also look at some of our online guides at

<http://lima.osu.edu/academic/writing/>

Summer hours:

9:00-2:00, Mon-Thurs

