

Five Glaring Grammatical Errors... and How to Fix Them

Today's fast-paced world is marked by its ease of communication. Instant messaging, text messaging, and email are common methods of quickly exchanging information and ideas. With this type of communication, good grammar tends to take a backseat to the need for speed. Of course, this isn't a problem when the audience is informal. When you are composing an academic essay or a letter intended for a teacher or an admissions officer, however, proper grammar is essential to your success. Making simple grammatical errors can prevent you from creating a positive impression. Fortunately, these types of mistakes are easy to avoid. If you're not a grammar guru, read on to pick up some basic grammar tips.

Mistake #1: <i>Its</i> versus <i>It's</i>	
Example	The class lost <i>it's</i> privileges.
False Assumption	If you want to show possession, you must use an apostrophe.
The Truth	<i>It's</i> always equals "it is." The possessive form of the word is always <i>its</i> , without an apostrophe.
The Correction	Ask yourself, "Do I mean <i>it is</i> ?" If not, skip the apostrophe. Similar common errors include the misuse of <i>there/their/they're</i> and <i>who's/whose</i> . Be sure to avoid these errors as well.
Mistake #2: Pronoun/Antecedent Disagreement	
Example	Every person (antecedent) must make <i>their</i> (pronoun) own decisions.
False Assumption	To stay gender neutral, you can use <i>their</i> instead of <i>his</i> or <i>her</i> .
The Truth	While you are canceling out gender, you are also making the reader think that you can't match up singular and plural words.
The Correction	Use <i>his</i> or <i>her</i> . The sentence above, for example, could be written like this: "Every person (antecedent) must make <i>her</i> (pronoun) own decisions." Or you can change the singular antecedent to a plural. In this case, you could write: "All people (antecedent) must make <i>their</i> (pronoun) own decisions."
Mistake #3: Lack of Parallel Structure	
Example	All Sophia ever wanted was to finish high school, to graduate from college, and a good job.
False Assumption	As long as a series of words has the same topic, parts of speech do not have to match up.
The Truth	Using parallel structure will make your sentence much clearer. It will keep the reader's focus on the idea at hand and off the nagging feeling that the sentence doesn't sound right.

The Correction	Make sure that terms in a series are always the same part of speech. If you end one verb with <i>-ing</i> , end them all with <i>-ing</i> . If you begin your list with a noun, stick to nouns throughout. Here's a better version of the sentence above: "All Sophia ever wanted was to finish high school, to graduate from college, and to find a good job."
Mistake #4: Run-on Sentences	
Example	John left before Sue could make her point, so she was angry, she chose to stay silent, however, rather than express her true feelings and risk hurting his.
False Assumption	When you're on a roll, keep going until you complete your entire thought.
The Truth	Independent clauses that contain a subject and a verb can be joined only with certain conjunctions such as <i>and</i> , <i>but</i> , and <i>so</i> . In addition, when you connect too many clauses in one sentence, you increase the chance of losing your focus and confusing your reader.
The Correction	Break down run-on sentences with periods or semicolons. This will allow you to keep the point of a sentence clear and to better control the pace of your text. The example above should be made into two sentences by inserting a period after the word <i>angry</i> .
Mistake #5: Spelling Errors	
Example	Common spelling errors are too numerous to list here.
False Assumption	Spelling doesn't count.
The Truth	In this day and age, errors in spelling are perceived as laziness or carelessness on the part of the writer.
The Correction	Use a spell-checker, proofread your text, and then have someone else proofread it. This may seem like overkill, but spell-checkers won't catch certain spelling and grammatical errors, so it's important to proofread as well.

Using proper grammar in formal text will earn you the respect of the reader. It will make your writing clearer, and it will also make you stand out as a proficient and intelligent student.