

The Most Common College-Level Writing Errors¹:

Unintended Sentence Fragments:

With a few exceptions sentences should have at least a verb and noun. The following are incomplete sentences:

John does . (Missing: John does what?)
Video games are important because . (Missing: Because what?)

Most commonly, students make the mistake of placing a period where there should be a comma. To test for an incomplete sentence read the sentence by itself and ask whether or not it is a complete thought.

Sentences with incorrectly connected clauses (i.e., run-on sentences).

Many run-ons are the result of trying to pack too much into a single sentence.

Many people misidentify run on sentences. An overly long sentence may seem like a run-on sentence, however the sentence may be technically correct and logically confusing.

Many run-ons can be corrected simply by inserting a semicolon, however modern many non-academic writing styles favor short, direct sentences. If reading the sentence aloud causes shortness of breath, it is probably time to split it into several sentences.

Error:

The Warriors is a spectacular movie that has more blood and more guts and more violence than what most people see in a day and that is why I think it is the best movie that anyone could see today **you should see it too.**

Shifts in verb tense or person that confuse because they have no purpose.

The perspective or tense from which the narrative is written shifts for no reason. A sudden shift to the second person, “you”, is the most common error.

Error:

The **player character** must evade the enemy while **you** keep your health from declining.

¹ Based on a list created by the University of Maine’s Elizabeth Dodge, Department of English. Available at <http://usm.maine.edu/wac/confusion.html>.

Problems with pronoun reference.

A pronoun's reference will be unclear if it is ambiguous, implied, vague, or indefinite. In particular, many students don't understand the "paragraph/pronoun rule": Every time a new paragraph is begun, the topic (noun) being discussed must be renamed. Thus if a student is writing a paper about Lincoln, the third paragraph cannot begin with the word "he"; it must begin with "Lincoln."

Error:

Locar, the son of Azeldar, is the ruler of the land. They both are great warriors. He must work hard to regain the faith of his people.

Lack of agreement between a pronoun and the word to which it refers.

It is generally agreed that the use of "they," where "he or she" used to be required. This creates gender neutrality. The former "he/she" construction is out of favor.

Error:

The audience member will clutch her remote in fear.

Shifts, mixed constructions, illogical connections.

These include shifts from direct address, to indirect address, awkwardly inserted phrases, and illogical connections.

Error:

You are the oldest man in the town because he has many feasts weekly.

Placement of modifiers.

Inability to punctuate non-standard situations.

Use of apostrophes and quotes specifically confuses students.

Apostrophes should be used as follows:

Contractions:

It's = it is

Its = its (possessive, e.g. this car has its own engine)

Omissions (e.g. for us in dialogue):

Could've = Could have

Cont'd = Continued

Possessives

Singular – add 's – as in John's house or the boat's oar.

Many singular nouns ending in s – add 's – as in the princess's sword

Some Singular and **Most** Plural nouns ending in s – only include ' – as in the horses' bridles or the dress' button.