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A GUIDE TO WRITING BETTER ENGLISH:

COMMON FAULTS IN ENGLISH SYNTAX AND GRAMMAR

In my web document entitled **Grades on essays and the mid-year test**: **for ECO 301Y and ECO 303Y** (available on my Home Page), I provided **a list of the most common faults on student essays & examinations**, with the indication that those that were checked off in the following list apply either wholly or partially to the answer given in the student's paper or examination. The final one, no. 8, states that: **Your written English is deficient in one or more of the following**:

> Grammar and syntax (e.g., 'run-on' sentences, dangling modifiers), spelling, word usage, punctuation. While the grade is not primarily based on the quality of your English, bad writing nevertheless hinders my understanding of what you are trying to express; and bad writing will almost inevitably produce a lower grade. Please refer to the web document (linked to my Home Page) on **A Guide to Writing Better English: Common Faults in English Grammar and Syntax.**

Striving to write good English is not a matter of mere pedantry; for, in writing any essay, report, examination, etc., your objective must be to convince the reader of your arguments, with the greatest possible clarity. In achieving this objective you must also appeal to the reader's sympathies, i.e., you must elicit a favourable impression to maintain the reader's attention and interest in what you have to say. Even if you are reasonably clear and cogent in your writing, you are unlikely to maintain the readers' attention and sympathy if your writing is clumsy, ugly, or in other ways deficient.

So please take the following examples of bad English seriously; and strive to improve your written (and spoken) English.

1. DANGLING MODIFIERS:

A participle (a present or past-tense participle, serving an adjectival function) that is lacking the correct noun to be modified (described):

Example: Before discussing the Dutch advantages in early-modern northern commerce, it is important to understand the disadvantages to be found in the Dutch economy.

As written, the present participle 'discussing' modifies 'it'; and 'it' cannot do any discussing.

Correct forms:

(1) Before discussing the Dutch advantages in early-modern northern commerce, we must first consider the disadvantages to be found in the Dutch economy. [Correct: 'discussing' properly modifies 'we', who do the discussing . But this is clumsy; and please keep personal pronouns out of your essay.]

OR: Before discussing the Dutch advantages in early-modern northern commerce,

historians should first examine the disadvantages to be found in the Dutch economy. [Better, but still clumsy.]

(2) No analysis of the Dutch advantages in early-modern northern commerce can commence without a prior examination of the disadvantages. [Solution: get rid of the participle.]

Another example:

Wrong: By prohibiting the manual exchange of foreign coins, so often debased and clipped, and by requiring that all commercial and financial transactions be effected through Wisselbank deposit accounts, perfect monetary stability was established in the Netherlands, with the scarce supply of silver reserved for the overseas trades. [Who or what did the prohibiting?]

Correct: The Wisselbank, by prohibiting the manual exchange of foreign coins, so often debased and clipped, and by requiring that all commercial and financial transactions be effected in bills through its deposit accounts, established perfect monetary stability within the Netherlands and thus more effectively ensured that the scarce supply of silver would be reserved for the overseas trades.

[Note as well the correct use of parallel structure in this complex sentence, in the manner explained below, in no. 3.]

2. **RUN-ON SENTENCE:**

Two principal clauses that are strung together without appropriate punctuation and/or conjunctions, thus forming two (or more) sentences that run confusingly together.

Examples:

(1) The Dutch gained commercial and financial supremacy during the later sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries, however, they lost that supremacy to Great Britain during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Fault: confusing 'however' (adverb) with 'but' (conjunction); 'but' is the proper and only conjunction to be used in linking thee two principal clauses, which, however, should also be separated by a semi-colon, for better clarity.

Note: 'However' may be used as a conjunction, but only in one restricted set of circumstances, when 'however' means 'in whatever manner or way'. Thus: 'We can go however he likes' [in whatever manner he likes]. Normally, however, the word 'however' is an adverb and thus cannot and may not be used as a conjunction (i.e., meaning 'but').

Correct: The Dutch gained commercial and financial supremacy during the later sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries; but subsequently, during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they lost that supremacy to Great Britain.

(2) During the fifteenth century, the Dutch gained supremacy over the Hanseatic Germans in both the herring fisheries and the Baltic trades, many of the German Hanse towns then suffered slow but irredeemable decline. [Note how these two distinctly separate sentences run on together without the proper conjunction or proper punctuation.]

Four possible correct alternative forms:

(a) During the fifteenth century, the Dutch gained supremacy over the Hanseatic Germans in both the herring fisheries and the Baltic trades; and subsequently, many of the German Hanse towns suffered slow but irredeemable decline.

[The two principal clauses are properly separated by the conjunction 'and' and also by a semi-colon.]

(b) During the fifteenth century, the Dutch gained supremacy over the Hanseatic Germans in both the herring fisheries and the Baltic trades. Subsequently, many of the German Hanse towns suffered slow but irredeemable decline. [Two completely separate sentences.]

(c) During the fifteenth century, the Dutch gained supremacy over the Hanseatic Germans in both the herring fisheries and the Baltic trades, *so that* many of the German Hanse towns subsequently suffered slow but irredeemable decline.

[Convert the second principal clause into a subordinate clause introduced by the conjunction *so that* --- i.e., with the result that...]

(d) During the fifteenth century, the Dutch gained supremacy over the Hanseatic Germans in both the herring fisheries and the Baltic trades, *while* many of the German Hanse towns thereafter suffered slow but irredeemable decline.

[Similarly convert the second principal clause into an adverbial subordinate clause].

3. **LACK OF PARALLEL STRUCTURE IN SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION:**

The use of subordinate (relative) clauses and/or adverbial/adjectival phrases that are dissimilar or unequal in form, in modifying the verb in the principal clause:

Wrong: The Dutch gained supremacy in the northern herring trades, *because* they developed superior, much larger-scale, more efficient fishing boats, *because of* the fifteenth-century shift of the herring spawning grounds from Scania in the Baltic to the North Sea fishing grounds between the Netherlands and England, and *also with* the benefits derived from on-board salt-curing.

Correct: The Dutch gained supremacy in the northern herring trades, because they developed superior, much larger-scale, more efficient fishing boats; because such craft, during the much longer sea voyages, permitted and indeed necessitated on-board salt-

curing, whose very rapidity greatly improved quality; and finally because, during the early fifteenth century, the spawning grounds shifted from Scania in the Baltic to the North Sea fishing grounds between the northern Netherlands and England.

Use either *because* [as a conjunction introducing a subordinate clause] or *because of* [as a preposition introducing an adverbial phrase], but not both forms together.

4. **IMPROPER USE OF THE OVERWORKED CONJUNCTION 'AS':**

Do not use 'as' to introduce a subordinate clause that follows the principal clause, when 'as' in that subordinate clause explains why: in the sense of 'because, since, for'.

Example: I opened the front door as the salesman was insistently pressing on the buzzer.

This can be confusing: does the sentence mean that I opened the door just as and at the very moment that the salesman was pressing on the buzzer? -- the only permissible form of 'as' in this particular construction; or, more likely, does it mean that I opened the door *because* the salesman was so insistently pressing on the buzzer? If the latter, the sentence is both confusing and inelegant.

5. **CONFUSING PRINCIPAL AND PRINCIPLE:**

- **Principal** means the primary, chief, leading, dominant, etc.; and it is usually an adjective, as in a 'principal clause', 'his principal adversary'. But it may also be a noun, as in 'the principal of the school.'

- **Principle** is always a noun that refers to a specific concept, procedure, code, intellectual mechanism etc. that governs or directs one mode's of conduct, or method of analysis, etc., as in 'the principles of economics'.

6. **USING GERUNDS (VERBAL NOUNS) WITH THE POSSESSIVE CASE.**

A gerund is a verbal noun: a verb form acting as a noun, e.g. as the subject or object of the principal clause in a sentence. As such, any other noun or pronoun modifying that gerund must be in the possessive case [and not in the objective case, in the latter example]

Wrong: The Exchequer officials queried them submitting tax receipts that were so often carelessly compiled.

Correct but clumsy: The Exchequer officials queried their submitting tax receipts that were so often carelessly compiled. [What was queried was not the persons but the actual submission of the carelessly compiled tax receipts: the pronoun thus must be in the possessive case in modifying the gerund 'submitting'.]

Better: The Exchequer officials queried the submission of the tax receipts that they had so often carelessly compiled. [Change the gerund into a regular noun.]

7. **DISTINGUISH BETWEEN 'DUE TO' AND 'BECAUSE' or 'BECAUSE OF':**

Note carefully that due is an adjective (implying or indicating causation) that follows a copula verb (to be), while 'because' is a conjunction introducing a relative clause, providing an explanation or indication of causation. Similarly, 'because of' is a preposition introducing an adverbial phrase that provides some explanation of causation.

The growth in English population from the 1740s was principally due to a change in nuptiality and thus in the birth rates. [Was, from 'to be', is a copula verb that may be modified by an adjective]

English population grew rapidly from the 1740s, principally because of a change in nuptiality and thus in the birth rate. ['principally due to' would be incorrect in this construction.]

8. **AVOID CONTRACTIONS. Do not use the following:** don't, isn't, wasn't, can't, it's, etc. Please note as well that it's is the contraction of 'it is', and not the possessive case of it.

9. **TO BE DIFFERENT: 'DIFFERENT FROM' HAS NO PERMISSIBLE ALTERNATIVES:**

The ever so common 'different than' and less common 'different to' are simply *wrong and unacceptable*. Your views or actions, etc. cannot 'differ than' something else; they must differ *from* the others. Those who commit this dreadful solecism condemn themselves to inferior status as writers -- and worse!

Please do not tel me that the Oxford English Dictionary, Webster's, and other authorities recognize the existence of the two aforesaid alternatives: different than, and different to. As far as I am concerned – and as far as Fowler and Strunk & White are concerned – they are still unacceptable.

DO NOT USE THEM!! EVER!!

10. **HOW TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN 'FEWER' AND 'LESS'**

a) **fewer:** means a smaller or reduced quantity defined by numbers or specific units of measurement.

b) **less:** means a smaller or reduced quantity that is not so specified, or is indicated by more general definitions of volume or bulk.

Thus: fewer cows provide less milk.

Would you ever say: Less cows provide fewer milk?

11. **SOME OTHER EXAMPLES OF INCORRECT USAGE:**

- **Decimate**: Please note that this verb, with Roman-Latin origins, means to kill one out of ten; and thus do not use it to mean 'to kill a large number....'. To state that the Black Death (a combination of bubonic and pneumonic plague) 'decimated' the population of mid and later 14th-century Europe is a gross understatement, because the combination of those plagues destroyed about 40 percent of the European population, by the 1370s.

- **None:** Please note that this pronoun must take the verb in the *singular*, because it means 'not one'. Never say: 'none of them are.....'

- **only**: the 'lonely only', when disconnected from the word that it modifies.

  e.g. They *only* went out to see a movie. Ugly: bad usage

  The correct usage is: They went out only to see a movie. Better form: They went out *just* to see a movie.

  e.g. The government could *only* require military service from men over 18 years of age.

  The correct usage is: The government could require military service from *only* those men over 18 years of age.

  To repeat: the adverb 'only' must be placed as close as feasible to the word that it modifies.

  Also: do not use *only* when you mean *merely* or *just.*

- **Plausible.** Despite the very common and generally accepted usage, 'plausible' does not really mean credible or believable, since it conveys an underlying tone of deceit.

  Thus *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (ed. H.W. and F.G Fowler, 3rd edn. 1934, with many reprints) defines **plausible**: 'Of arguments, statements, etc.: specious, seeming reasonable or probable; of persons: fair spoken (usually implying deceit). [From L *plausbibilis*]'.

  The *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1975 edn.) similarly states, for **plausible**: 'adj (L *plausibilis*: worthy of applause] 1: superficially fair, reasonable, or valuable, but often specious; 2: superficially or pleasing or persuasive; 3: appearing worthy of belief.'

  More nuanced, perhaps in accordance with the current temper of the times, is *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (1998 edn.), which more curtly states, for **plausible**: 'of an argument, statement, etc., seeming reasonable, believable, or probable.' [But note the use of the word *seeming*.]

12. **THE USE OF WHICH AND THAT, WITH APPROPRIATE PUNCTUATION, IN**

RELATIVE/SUBORDINATE CLAUSES: defining (restrictive) and non-defining (non-restrictive).

Since the vast majority of writers, including the vast majority of good writers, neglect to observe the following rule about 'defining' and 'non-defining' relative clauses, the failure to do so can hardly be considered a major sin, or indeed even an error. Since, however, at least two editors have rapped me on the knuckles for failing to observe this rule in the past, I have been forced to examine this rule more closely, and have thereby concluded that observing it does indeed add to clarity. Please do consider the following carefully, before condemning this advice as mere pedantry.

A defining relative (subordinate) clause is one that specifies that the noun so modified is unique (i.e., the only possible one); **such a relative clause should be introduced by the conjunction 'that' (rather than 'which'), and it *must* not be separated by commas from the principal clause.**

Example: The river that flows through London [England] is murky and turbid.

[The relative clause tells us specifically what river is meant, and indeed the only river meant in this context. Removal of the relative clause would make the sentence meaningless: The river is murky and turbid. We want to know specifically what river is meant by this criticism.]

A non-defining relative clause is one that merely adds additional but non-crucial information; it should commence with the conjunction 'which' (and not 'that') and it must be separated from the principal clause by the two commas.

Example 1: The English river Thames, which flows through London, is murky and turbid.

[By specifically naming this river, the author merely supplies additional but non-crucial or 'non-defining' information about the river; and removal of this relative clause in no way impairs the meaning of the sentence: The English river Thames is murky and turbid.]

Example 2: The Humber River that flows through metropolitan Toronto is quite polluted.

Explanation: This defining relative clause ensures that the European reader does not confuse this particular and little-known Humber River, in Canada, with the much better known Humber River in England.

Or: The Humber River, i.e., the one that flows through metropolitan Toronto, is quite polluted.

[Here the defining relative clause modifies the noun 'one'.]

Example 3: **The same rules apply to the use of the relative conjunction 'who' and 'whose' in defining and non-defining relative clauses, viz:**

The British military officer who defeated Napoleon became a duke: the famed 'Iron Duke' of Wellington.

Arthur Wellesley (1769-1852), who received a peerage as the Duke of Wellington, for his victories over Napoleon, was Great Britain's greatest national hero in the nineteenth century.

The Duke of Wellington, whose peerage was the reward for his victories over Napoleon, was Great Britain's greatest national hero in the nineteenth century.

The British general whose peerage was earned in the Napoleonic Wars was Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, who is perhaps better known as the Iron Duke.

13. THE USE OF COMMAS IN ENGLISH WRITING

a) Commas should be used to set off (separate) introductory adjectival or adverbial phrases and relative clauses from the principal clause (and also for such phrases or clauses added after the principal clause, to conclude the sentence).

b) In particular, commas must be used to set off, or separate, non-defining (non-restrictive) relative clauses – those beginning with the conjunction 'which', as defined in section ll above; and, for reasons explained in that section, commas must not be used to set off defining or restrictive relative clauses, i.e., those beginning with the conjunction 'that'.

c) In the middle of the sentence or principal clause, commas must be used in pairs, to set off relative clauses. THUS A SINGLE COMMA MUST NEVER SEPARATE THE SUBJECT OF THE SENTENCE FROM ITS VERB, OR THE VERB FROM ITS OBJECT OR COMPLEMENT. To repeat: use commas in pairs, or not at all, in the middle of a sentence.

d) **Latin abbreviations and punctuation:**

the use of i.e. and e.g.: the abbreviations for the Latin terms, *id est* (i.e., meaning 'that is'), and *exempli gratia* (e.g., meaning, 'for example') should normally be followed by a comma [i.e., and e.g.,].

Some publishers, however — e.g., Cambridge University Press – no longer use the comma, in this format, as an economy measure.

Others (e.g., University of Toronto Press) prefer that the English translations – that is, and for example – be used instead of the abbreviations. In latter case, these words must be followed by a comma.

14. See the following aids to improve your writing on my Home Page:

(1) The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edn.: http://datacentre.chass.utoronto.ca/oed/index.html

(2) The Merriam-Webster OnLine Dictionary and Thesaurus: http://www.m-w.com/dictionary.htm

(3) Roget's Thesaurus: http://humanities.uchicago.edu/forms_unrest/ROGET.html

(4) The Human-Languages Page (iLoveLanguages): http://www.ilovelanguages.com/

(5) H.W. Fowler: The King's English: http://www.bartleby.com/116/index.html

(6) William Strunk: The Elements of Style: http://www.bartleby.com/141/

(7) Bartlett's Familiar Quotations: http://www.bartleby.com/100/

(8) Advice on Academic Writing at the University of Toronto:

http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/advise.html

SYMBOLS TO INDICATE FAULTS IN SYNTAX AND GRAMMAR

Refer to the handout on writing terms essays, with the appendix on 'Major and common faults in English grammar and syntax,' for a further explanation of these terms.

AS	**Improper use of the conjunction 'as',** which should not follow the main verb, when it concerns causation: meaning 'since', 'because', or 'for'.
AT	**Abrupt transitions:** abrupt change in topics and/or ideas between paragraphs, without proper connectives and in particular without a proper topic sentence to link them.
DM	**Dangling modifier:** a participial phrase in which the participle (a verbal form with adjectival properties) does not properly modify or relate to the subject of the sentence. For example: 'looking at his watch, the thought occurred to him that he was running late'. Did the 'thought' look at his watch?
DUE	Improper use of the word 'due', which is an adjective (indicating causation) that follows a copula verb (to be). The proper word to use here is either 'because', a conjunction introducing a subordinate clause, which provides an explanation of causation, or 'because of', a preposition introducing an adverbial phrase explaining causation.
FS	**Faulty syntax:** other errors, as explained in the web-document.
GE	**Grammatical errors:** e.g., subject (noun) and verb not in agreement; improper use of personal or relative pronouns; incorrect use of the possessive (its and **not** it's)**.**
GER	**Faulty use of the gerund:** a gerund is a verbal noun and it must, therefore, be governed by another noun or pronoun in the *possessive* case. See the web document on Grammar and Syntax.
LAN	Lack of agreement in number (plural and singular): between the subject noun and its verb; or the antecedent of a noun or pronoun in the same sentence.
LESS	Confusion in the use of and proper distinction between 'less' and 'fewer'
LPS	**Lack of parallel structure:** see the aforementioned web-document on English grammar. The most common example of this fault is to provide an explanation with a sequence of causes, using both 'because of' (adverbial phrase) and 'because' (conjunction introducing a subordinate clause).
NAS	**Not a sentence.** A statement that lacks a subject (noun) and/or a proper verb; and is therefore just a phrase or a subordinate clause standing by itself.
NS	**Non sequiturs:** what you state as a conclusion in this sentence does not logically follow from the arguments and/or evidence that you have previously set forth. The fault may lie in the way in which you have organized the paragraph.

PE	**Punctuation errors:** especially those involving commas and semi-colons.
PEWT	**Punctuation errors involving the use of relative conjunctions: 'which' and 'that'.**
RO	**Run-on sentence:** a sentence containing two or more principal clauses (two sentences), without proper conjunctions (e.g., but) and punctuation (semi-colon or period). The most common version of this irritating fault is the improper use of 'however' as a conjunction, instead of the proper one, 'but'; and to do so with a comma, rather than with the required semi-colon or period.
SI	**Split infinitives:** justifiable instances for splitting an infinitive, by inserting an adverb, are few and far between, and are virtually never found in student essays. To do so is usually inelegant or ugly.
SP	**Spelling errors** (e.g.: lead instead of led, for the past tense of the verb to lead.**)**
WU	**Improper use of words:** you have used the wrong words or given incorrect meanings.