The Top Twenty GSU Grammar Errors

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1   Missing commas to set off nonessential information

Commas are used before and after words that interrupt a sentence and add extra information. If the basic meaning of the sentence does not change significantly without the extra information, then the added words are nonessential rather than essential information and are set off in commas.

INCORRECT: The starting quarterback who won the writing contest is in my class.

If the reader can remove the phrase "who won the writing contest" and still know who the starting quarterback is, commas are needed.

CORRECT: The starting quarterback, who won the writing contest, is in my class.

If there is only one starting quarterback, the commas around "who won the writing contest" are necessary because this phrase is intended only to add extra information about him. If, however, there is more than one quarterback to whom the writer could be referring, the information is essential to identifying which one – the one who won the writing contest – so commas would not be needed.

CORRECT: The quarterback who won the writing contest is in my class.

2   Unnecessary commas to set off essential information

Commas are used to set off information that interrupts and does not significantly alter the meaning of a sentence. If the information is necessary to make the meaning clear, the writer should not set off these words or phrases in commas (this mistake is the opposite of missing commas to set off nonessential information).

INCORRECT: The student, who won the writing contest, is in my class.

The commas setting off "who won the writing contest" are incorrect because the information is necessary to understand the meaning of the sentence.

CORRECT: The student who won the writing contest is in my class.

No commas are needed because "who won the writing contest" is necessary to identify which student the writer is referring to.

3   Missing comma before a coordinating conjunction combining two independent clauses

Commas are used before coordinating conjunctions – for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so – if the coordinating conjunction is used to connect two complete sentences (independent clauses).

INCORRECT: I wanted to go to the beach but I couldn't afford to pay for a hotel room.

"I wanted to go to the beach" and "I couldn't afford to pay for a hotel room," are complete sentences joined with a coordinating conjunction, so a comma should be placed before the conjunction.

CORRECT: I wanted to go to the beach, but I couldn't afford to pay for a hotel room.

Another way to correct this error is to remove the subject of the second clause, if both subjects are the same:

CORRECT: I wanted to go to the beach but couldn't afford to pay for a hotel room.

"I wanted to go to the beach" is a complete sentence, but "couldn't afford to pay for the hotel room" is not. A comma should not be placed before the coordinating conjunction.

4   Lack of pronoun agreement

Use pronouns precisely and consistently. The pronoun must agree with the number, gender, and type of subject.

INCORRECT: Each member of the rowing team had to set their alarm for three in the morning.

"Each member" is singular, so the pronoun must also be singular.

CORRECT: Each member of the rowing team had to set her alarm for three in the morning.

The noun and pronoun are both singular.

5   Split infinitives

An infinitive is "to" plus a verb. A split infinitive is an infinitive with a word or words in between the "to" and the verb. Split infinitives do not necessarily cause confusion, but many readers disapprove.

INCORRECT: The professor asked the students to quickly take the quiz.

"To take" is an infinitive and should not be split by an adverb.

CORRECT: The professor asked the students to take the quiz quickly.

"Quickly" can be moved to follow "to take the quiz." It is important not to create a misplaced modifier by placing "quickly" at the beginning of the sentence.

6   Missing comma after introductory element

Commas help to separate an opening idea from the rest of a sentence. A comma follows an introductory word, phrase, or clause.

INCORRECT: Furthermore everyone must wait thirty minutes after eating before they go swimming.

CORRECT: Furthermore, everyone must wait thirty minutes after eating before they go swimming.

"Furthermore" is an introductory word and should be followed by a comma to avoid possible confusion.

CORRECT: From his perch in the top of the tree, John could see the neighbor's dog chewing on the children's missing Frisbee.

"From his perch in the top of the tree" is an introductory phrase and should be followed by a comma.

CORRECT: Even though he knew that his brother would be angry over the lost Frisbee, John wasn't brave enough to go get it.

"Even though he knew that his brother would be angry over the lost Frisbee" is an introductory clause and should be followed by a comma.

INCORRECT: Risking his life over a Frisbee, just didn't seem worth it.

"Risking his life over a Frisbee" is the subject of the sentence, not an introductory phrase, and should not be followed by a comma.

7   Comma splice

A comma splice results when two independent clauses (two separate sentences) are joined with only a comma rather than with a period or semicolon. Writers often unintentionally create comma splices when using transitional words such as however, therefore, moreover, nevertheless, and furthermore. These conjunctive adverbs seem like coordinating conjunctions (for, and, nor, or, but, yet, so) but cannot be used in the same way.

INCORRECT: I had planned to enroll over the summer, however, I couldn't find any classes to fulfill my major requirements.

Since "however" is not a coordinating conjunction, a comma is not enough to join the two sentences.

CORRECT: I had planned to enroll over the summer; however, I couldn't find any classes to fulfill my major requirements.

A semicolon before "however" is a correct replacement for the comma.

CORRECT: I had planned to enroll over the summer, but I couldn't find any classes to fulfill my major requirements.

"But" is a coordinating conjunction, so the comma is enough to join the two sentences.

8   Wrong word

Choosing the right word for the meaning you are trying to communicate takes some care and attention. Sometimes a writer chooses a wrong word because it sounds like another word. "Their," "there," and "they're" sound the same, but they have very different meanings. Contractions can also cause problems. "Should've" sounds like "should of," but the contraction is actually of the words "should have."

INCORRECT: You're semester is difficult because your taking too many classes.

"You're" means "you are" and "your" is possessive. Both are used incorrectly in this sentence.

CORRECT: Your semester is difficult because you're taking too many classes.

"You're" and "your" are used correctly in this sentence.

9   Misplaced modifier

A modifier – a word, phrase, or clause that describes something else – goes next to whatever it modifies. A misplaced modifier can confuse a reader because the modifier appears to describe the wrong element in the sentence.

INCORRECT: Jamie ate a sandwich wearing a GSU sweatshirt.

"Wearing a GSU sweatshirt" modifies Jamie, so the phrase should be next to Jamie in the sentence. This sentence suggests that the sandwich is wearing the sweatshirt.

CORRECT: Wearing a GSU sweatshirt, Jamie ate a sandwich.

"Wearing a GSU sweatshirt" clearly modifies Jamie in this sentence.

10   Semicolon mistakes

A semicolon is used to separate two independent clauses (two separate sentences) that are closely related. Often, semicolons appear before transitional words such as however, therefore, moreover, furthermore, or nevertheless when they appear in the middle of sentence. Semicolons can also be used to separate detailed items in a series. Experienced writers use semicolons infrequently.

INCORRECT: John should enroll in an upper-level sociology class; he has always wanted to join the swim club.

These two complete sentences are not closely related in meaning, so a semicolon should not be used to join them.

CORRECT: John should enroll in an upper-level sociology class; he has fulfilled all of the prerequisites, and he is interested in the topic.

This semicolon joins two closely related sentences.

INCORRECT: Many important members of the university attended the talk: Dr. Becker, the university president, Dr. Palms, the provost, and Dr. Stout, the dean of students.

The items in this list already contain commas, so semicolons are needed here to distinguish between the items.

CORRECT: Many important members of the university attended the talk: Dr. Becker, the university president; Dr. Palms, the provost; and Dr. Stout, the dean of students.

The semicolons are necessary to divide the complex items in the list clearly.

INCORRECT: I; however, couldn't find any classes to fulfill my major requirements.

The "however" in this sentence is not joining two sentences, so the semicolon is not needed.

11   Possessive mistakes

Possessives illustrate ownership. Most of us know the rules of punctuating possession, but in the heat of the moment, when we're trying to get our ideas across, we either forget to add an apostrophe or we accidentally make a word possessive that should be simply plural.

INCORRECT: Simon decided to join the mens' group.

The "s" is not needed to make "men" plural. In irregular plurals such as this one, the "s" is necessary only to show possession and so should come after the apostrophe.

CORRECT: Simon decided to join the men's group.

"Men" is already plural and needs only the "'s" to make it possessive.

CORRECT: The professor was concerned about the students' lack of interest.

A plural noun already ending in "s" needs only an apostrophe.

INCORRECT: The professor was concerned about the students's lack of interest.

"Students" is plural, so the additional "s" is not necessary after the apostrophe.

12   Colon mistakes

A colon is used after a complete sentence to introduce a word, phrase, clause, list, or quotation. The colon indicates that what follows proves or explains the sentence before the colon.

INCORRECT: Students choose GSU for: its urban environment, its diverse student body, and its rigorous academic reputation.

"Students choose GSU for" is not a complete sentence.

CORRECT: Students choose GSU for three main reasons: its urban environment, its diverse student body, and its reputation for academic rigor.

The list that follows this colon explains the complete sentence that precedes the colon.

13   Dangling modifier

A modifier – a word, phrase, or clause that describes something else – must modify something in the sentence. A dangling modifier occurs when the element being modified is implied rather than stated.

INCORRECT: Turning the corner onto Peachtree Street, the park's roses were blooming.

In this sentence, it is unclear who or what turned the corner. The phrasing seems to say that the park turned the corner.

CORRECT: Turning the corner onto Peachtree Street, we saw that the park's roses were blooming.

"We" turned the corner, so "we" needs to be in the sentence.

14   Lack of parallel structure

A list or comparison of equally significant ideas should use the same grammatical pattern. Nonparallel structure can confuse a reader because different grammatical patterns within a list suggest that the items in the list don't belong together.

> **INCORRECT: Biology is my major because the subject is challenging, interesting, and excites me.**
>
> *Since "excites me" does not have the same grammatical construction as the other items of the list –"challenging" and "interesting" are adjectives and "excites" is a verb – the sentence reads awkwardly.*
>
> **CORRECT: Biology is my major because the subject is challenging, interesting, and exciting.**
>
> *The three items in this list are equal and parallel in structure.*
>
> **INCORRECT: Biology is my major because the subject is challenging, interesting, and I plan on being a veterinarian.**
>
> *"I plan on being a veterinarian" does not have the same grammatical construction as the other items in the list, so it reads awkwardly.*
>
> **CORRECT: I plan on being a veterinarian, so biology is my major. I chose biology because I also find it challenging and interesting.**
>
> *Unlike the other two items on the list, "I plan on being a veterinarian" is an independent clause, so placing it in a separate sentence is one way to correct the parallelism problem.*

15   Run-on sentences

A run-on sentence is two or more independent clauses joined without the necessary punctuation separating them. Complex or long sentences are sometimes necessary, but you must join your ideas in a way that will not confuse the reader.

> **INCORRECT: It was snowing last Wednesday school was shut down.**
>
> *"It was snowing last Wednesday" and "school was shut down" are both complete sentences and need the appropriate punctuation, or a conjunction plus punctuation, to connect them.*
>
> **CORRECT: It was snowing last Wednesday, so school was shut down.**
>
> *The two complete sentences can be combined with a comma and the coordinating conjunction "so." A period or semicolon without the coordinating conjunction can also fix a run-on sentence.*

16   Fragments

A fragment is an incomplete sentence. It is a group of words that may start with a word which makes it a dependent clause, or it may lack a subject or a verb. Often a fragment has accidentally been separated from the sentence to which it belongs.

> **INCORRECT: GSU will have to raise tuition next year. Because the state government will not raise taxes to support education.**
>
> *"Because the state government will not raise taxes to support education" does have a subject and predicate, but "because" makes this group of words a dependent clause. It must connect to the main clause to be a complete sentence.*
>
> **CORRECT: GSU will have to raise tuition next year because the state government will not raise taxes to support education.**
>
> *The dependent clause is now a part of the sentence.*
>
> **INCORRECT: The inevitable laying off of faculty and staff.**
>
> *This sentence has no predicate.*
>
> **CORRECT: Faculty and staff layoffs are inevitable.**
>
> *The sentence is no longer a fragment because there is now a subject, "layoffs," and a predicate, "are inevitable."*

17   Lack of subject/verb agreement

The verb in a sentence must agree with the subject in number and person. If the subject is plural, the verb must also be plural. If singular, then singular. Additionally, if the subject is in the first person, the verb must be also.

> **INCORRECT: One of my professors always spill coffee on my papers.**
>
> *Although "professors" is plural, the subject of this sentence, "one," is singular (the phrase "of my professors" comes between the subject and verb). The plural form of the verb does not match the singular subject.*
>
> **CORRECT: One of my professors always spills coffee on my papers.**
>
> *Both the subject and verb are now singular.*

18   Vague pronoun reference

A pronoun must refer clearly to a noun that has already been stated. A vague pronoun reference occurs when there is more than one noun to which the pronoun might be referring. In other cases, the word that the pronoun refers to is only implied. Either way, the reader can be confused about what subject the pronoun refers to.

INCORRECT: If your students don't do well on their quizzes, they must not be very good.

"They" is a vague pronoun in this sentence because it could refer to the students or the quizzes.

CORRECT: Your quizzes must not be very good if your students don't do well on them.

In this sentence, it is clear that "them" refers to the quizzes and not the students.

19   Unnecessary tense shift

Use verb tenses consistently. If you start out in the present, don't shift into the past without a reason. Sometimes you need to shift tenses to reflect a change in time, but an unnecessary shift can confuse the reader about what happened when.

INCORRECT: Someone pulled the fire alarm yesterday, so we get out of class without taking the quiz.

In this sentence there is not a clear reason to switch from the past tense, "pulled," to the present tense, "get."

CORRECT: Someone pulled the fire alarm yesterday, so we got out of class without taking the quiz.

Both verbs are in the past tense because both events happened yesterday.

20   Inappropriate passive or active voice

The active and passive voice are not grammatically correct or incorrect; however, writers often choose the inappropriate voice for a sentence. The passive voice removes the actor from the subject or from the sentence entirely. This removal is appropriate in certain situations, particularly in science and business. Otherwise, you should usually use the active voice.

INCORRECT: I poured the solution into the beaker.

The active voice would be inappropriate here if this sentence is part of a lab report. In science writing, the person performing an experiment should be irrelevant to the process.

CORRECT: The solution was poured into the beaker.

Using the passive voice removes the "I" from the sentence.

INCORRECT: Native Americans were repeatedly pushed further west.

Removing the actor from this sentence is inappropriate because knowing who did the pushing is important information.

CORRECT: European settlers repeatedly pushed Native Americans further west.

Using the active voice makes clear who caused the action.

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CTW courses are designed to develop students' critical thinking abilities within their major area of study. All GSU students seeking baccalaureate degrees are required to pass two CTW courses in their major. The courses incorporate short writing assignments that encourage students to examine the course content in a new light and to use the tools they have learned in their courses to think like members of their discipline.

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