COMMON GRAMMAR MISTAKES

PROBLEM WORDS

AFFECT VS. EFFECT

Generally, *affect* is a verb that means "to influence." *Effect* is a noun that means "result."

>The storm *affected* a large area.
>The storm's *effects* included many power failures.

Quick caveat: In rare instances, you may see e*ffect* used as a verb that means "to cause" and *affect* used as a noun that means "emotion."

>The drug *effected* a change in the patient's condition.
>Her *affect* was one of quiet contemplation.

These last two uses are fairly obscure, however. Therefore, keep this general rule of thumb in mind while you are writing:

> **Hint** In most cases, use *affect* when you need a verb and *effect* when you need a noun.

BETWEEN VS. AMONG

When you're talking about two objects or people, use *between*. When you're talking about more than two, use *among*.

>There was tension *between* Tom and Bob
>Laughter spread *among* the students when Jerry started to dance.

ITS VS. IT'S

Its is the possessive form of "it." *It's* means "it is."

>*Its* wings flutter gracefully
>*It's* considered bad luck to walk under a ladder.

THAT VS. WHICH

If the purpose of the clause is to single out something, use *that*. If, however, the clause delivers extra information that is non-essential to the sentence, use *which*.

>The book *that* Janet gave me fell off the table.
>The book, *which* Janet gave me, fell off the table.

>The beach ball spiraled toward a sea *that* was white with foam.

The beach ball spiraled toward the sea, *which* was white with foam.

Hint Read your sentence out loud. Do you pause before and/or after the clause? That pause indicates the need for a comma—and commas are used only with *which*. If you don't notice yourself pausing, use *that.*

VERB-SUBJECT AGREEMENT
Getting a verb and subject to agree can be tricky. Here are a few situations to watch for:

- When a relative clause—a clause that modifies a noun—begins with *one of,* the verb within the clause should be **plural**.

  Jennifer is *one of* those people who are always prepared.
  Peter is *one of* the most gifted scientists who have attacked this problem.

- *Each, either, everyone, everybody, neither, nobody,* and *someone* are **singular**.

  Nobody is perfect.
  Everybody participates in writing class.
  Each of the items in these designs *coordinates* with the others.

- Compound subjects (two or more nouns joined by "and") take **plural verbs**.

  My pencil *and* my eraser *are* missing.
  Joe *and* Bob *have* fun at Bren.

- When **connectors other than "and"** (for example, *as well as, in addition to, together with, except*) are used, the **verb remains singular**
  My pencil, *as well as* my eraser, *is* missing.

- If the subject follows the verb, the verb must still agree with the subject.

  There *are* five basic *positions* in classical ballet.

- Some subjects look singular but are actually plural.

  The *data* from this study *are* surprising.
  The *phenomena are* well documented.

PUNCTUATION

COMMA USE AFTER AN INTRODUCTORY CLAUSE
Many people do not use a comma after a short (three words or less) introductory clause. Technically, this approach is grammatically correct; however, adding a comma can dramatically boost the clarity of a sentence.

Consider the following example:

In German*,* nouns are always capitalized.

Had the comma been omitted from the sentence, one might mistakenly read the first part of the sentence as "In German nouns,…" Inserting a comma after every introductory clause, no matter what the length, can help prevent such misinterpretations.

Hint How best to decide if you need a comma? Read your sentence out loud. Wherever you pause naturally, insert a comma.

COMMA USE WITH PARENTHETICAL CLAUSES
If a sentence contains a parenthetical clause—in essence, a clause that could fit easily within parentheses— place commas around it.

The best way to see the country*,* unless you are pressed for time*,* is by foot.
Our guest lecturer*,* Professor Peabody*,* presented his latest research.

Hint If you can cut the clause or phrase out of the sentence without changing the meaning of the text, it's probably parenthetical.

COMMA USE IN COMPOUND SENTENCES
An independent clause is a clause that could survive as a sentence on its own. (It contains its own subject and verb.) When a conjunction, such as *and, but,* or *because,* is used to connect two independent clauses, a compound sentence is formed. In these cases, a comma must be placed before the conjunction.

The situation is perilous*, but* there is still hope.
The early records of the city have disappeared*, and* the story of its first years can no longer be reconstructed.

SEMICOLON USE BETWEEN INDEPENDENT CLAUSES
When two independent clauses are not connected by a conjunction, you must place a semicolon or a period between them. Using a semicolon instead of a period signals a close relationship between the two clauses.

Air traffic delays due to high traffic volume have increased considerably over the last decade*;* these delays have become a major public policy issue.

If an adverb is placed between the two clauses, a semicolon should still be used.

Increasing the size of airports is one solution to traffic congestion*;* however, this is a long-term solution whose benefits may not be seen for many years into the future.

It is not correct to use a semicolon to separate an independent and dependent clause.

SEMICOLON USE IN LISTS

For clarity's sake, semicolons are often used in place of commas within **lists**.

Sometimes semicolons are used because several commas are contained within individual items of the list and adding more would cause confusion:

In recent years, GNP growth rates have varied considerably for the countries in the study (China, 6%*;* U.S., 3%*;* Japan, 1%).

Anthropology encompasses several fields: archaeology, the study of ancient civilizations through artifacts*;* linguistics, the study of the structure and development of language*;* and cultural anthropology, the study of the way of life of various peoples, especially small, non-industrialized societies.

Semicolons may also be appropriate when individual elements of the list are longer than a word or two:

Some of the solutions to the air traffic delay problem include increasing the size of airports that routinely experience major flight delays*;* overhauling the air traffic control system so that more flights can be safely handled*;* and increasing landing fees (which are currently based on the weight of an aircraft during peak periods.

Hint If each element of your list is longer than a word or two and/or one or more elements contains commas, use a semicolon between items for clarity's sake.

COMMON STYLE MISTAKES

"When you are out to describe truth, leave elegance to the tailor."
--Albert Einstein

Style in science writing is not necessarily what is stylish or decorative. It's usually concise and precise.

WORD CHOICE

"While precision means saying what you mean, clarity means avoiding things that you don't mean."
--Michael Alley "The Craft of Scientific Writing"

Because science writing must be concise, you need to make every word count; therefore, avoid sprawling sentence and trim all excess words.

Example of a wordy sentence: According to some biologists, *coming up with* clear proof of the decreasing numbers of frogs has been difficult.

Revision: According to some biologists, *offering* clear proof of the decreasing number of frogs has been difficult.

Example: The purpose of this paper is to *try to figure out* what is lacking in our current understanding of corrosion and corrosion protection in concrete.

Revision: The purpose of this paper is to *investigate* what is lacking in our current understanding of corrosion and corrosion protection in concrete.

TONE

Tone is linked to word choice. As you read more in scientific journals, you will recognize what tone is appropriate for a scientific, academic journal or public policy paper.

Consider who your audience is:
1. Academic readers: What are their discipline-specific needs?
2. Public policymakers: How do you communicate complex information to a general audience?

Example of language that is too informal: There has been a lot of interest in how global warming will affect different countries.

Revision: Many organizations, from the United Nations to policymakers in individual countries, are creating programs to deal with global warming.

Example of language that is too formal: In that the "Big Bang," currently the most credible theory about how the universe was created, explains only the

creation of hydrogen and helium, we are left to theorize as to how all the other elements came into being. Having studied the nuclear reactions that constitute the life and death cycles of stars, many scientists believe therein lies the key.

More straightforward: The "Big Bang" is the most credible theory for the creation of the universe. Nevertheless, the "Big Bang" explains the creation of only helium and hydrogen. What about the other elements? Many scientists believe that they arose from nuclear reactions that occur in the life and death cycles of stars.

ACTIVE OR PASSIVE VERBS?
Some scientists use passive tense to put the emphasis on the action rather than the actors. Others favor active verbs that enliven texts. Ultimately, the key to choosing between an active and passive verb is to ask which form is more natural.

Example of stilted passive voice: There are some inorganic materials that can be used by bioengineers in the process of tissue engineering that have been shown to be very promising.

Acceptable passive voice: Some inorganic materials used in tissue engineering have shown great promise.

Example of lifeless passive: A new process for eliminating nitrogen oxides from diesel exhaust engines is presented.

More natural: This paper presents a new process for eliminating nitrogen oxides from the exhaust of diesel exhaust engines.

Example of weak verb construction: The human immune system is responsible not only for the identification of foreign molecules, but also for actions leading to their immobilization, neutralization, and destruction.

Revised with active verbs: The human immune system not only identified foreign molecules, but also immobilizes, neutralizes, and destroys them.

USE OF "I" OR "WE"

Some scientists avoid using "I" or "we," but this is not a hard and fast rule. If you do use this point of view, establish using "I" or "we" early in the document.

Example: First, *I* present my findings about the viscosity of oil on drums.

Revision: First, findings about the viscosity of oil on drums are presented.

> **Hint** Avoid addressing the reader as "you," unless writing instructive materials.

Example: *You* can see the results in Table 1.

Revision: Table 1 displays the results.

FLOW

TRANSITIONS

Flow is created by making connections between ideas. In your effort to be concise, don't eliminate transitions that help your writing flow.

Example of choppy prose without transitions:

Lasers have found widespread application in medicine. Lasers play an important role in the treatment of eye disease and the prevention of blindness. The eye is ideally suited for laser surgery. Most of the eye tissue is transparent. The frequency and focus of the laser beam can be adjusted according to the absorption of the tissue. The beam "cuts" inside the eye with minimal damage to the surrounding tissue—even the tissue between the laser and the incisions. Lasers are effective in treating some causes of blindness. Other treatments are not. The interaction between laser light and eye tissues is not fully understood.

Revised paragraph with transitions:

Lasers have found widespread application in medicine. *For example,* they play an important role in the treatment of eye disease and the prevention of blindness. The eye is ideally suited for laser surgery *because* most of the eye tissue is transparent. The frequency and focus of the laser beam can be adjusted according to the absorption of the tissue *so* the beam "cuts" inside the eye with minimal damage to the surrounding tissue—even the tissue between the laser and the incisions. *While* effective in treating some causes of blindness, lasers are not useful for others. More research is needed to more fully understand the interaction between laser light and eye tissues.

LINKING WORDS AND PHRASES

Make connections within and between sentences using this helpful list of transitional words and phrases.

For addition: *in addition, furthermore, moreover*
For cause and effect: *because, as a result, hence, because of, as a result of*
For clarification: *in other words, that is, i.e.*
For contrast: *on the other hand, in contrast, however, unlike, conversely*
For illustration: *for example, for instance*
For intensification: *in fact, on the contrary*

For opposition: *although, even though, despite the fact, however, nevertheless, in spite of*

REFERENCES
Examples used in this worksheet were drawn from the following sources:

Alley, M. (1996). *The craft of scientific writing* (3rd ed.). New York: Springer.

Lunsford, A. A. (2003). *The St. Martin's handbook* (5th ed.). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin.

Strunk, W. & White, E.B. (1979). *Elements of style* (3rd ed.). New York: MacMillan Publishing Co.

Swales, J.M. & Feak, C.B. (2004). *Academic writing for graduate students: Essential tasks and skills* (2nd ed.). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.