

COMMON MISTAKES CHEAT SHEET

COMPLETE SENTENCES

To be complete, a sentence must have a subject (a person, place, or thing at the focus of the sentence) and a verb (usually an action the subject is doing). Some fragments – pieces of a larger sentence – are acceptable in informal writing or dialogue but not in academic writing.

EXAMPLES

Fragment: Washing the car.

“Washing” is the verb, but there is no subject doing the washing.

Fragment: Because I said so.

The “Because” indicates information is missing and makes this a fragment.

Complete sentence: Jeremy should wash the car because I said so.

This sentence has a subject (“Jeremy”) and a verb (“should wash”) and ties the fragments together into a sentence.

SUBJECT/VERB AGREEMENT

In a sentence, the subject and verb must agree, meaning that they must be of the same number. Singular subjects go with singular verbs, and plural subjects go with plural verbs. Two subjects joined with an “and” are usually treated as plural. When two subjects are joined with an “or” or “nor,” the verb agrees with the closest subject. Indefinite subjects like *each*, *someone*, or *anything* are usually treated as singular.

EXAMPLES

Incorrect: The leader of the herd of ostriches squawk in anger.

Correct: The leader of the herd of ostriches squawks in anger.

Because the subject (“the leader”) is singular, even though the word right before the verb (“ostriches”) is plural, the verb should be singular (“squawks”).

Incorrect: Two references or a letter of recommendation are required.

In this “or” situation, since the subject closest to the verb is singular (“a letter of recommendation”), the verb should be singular.

Incorrect: Each of the audience members are waiting for the premiere.

“Each” is an indefinite singular subject, so the verb should be “is.”

PRONOUN AGREEMENT

Pronouns within a sentence must also agree in gender and number with the noun to which they refer.

EXAMPLES

Incorrect: Carolyn adores his brother’s dog.

Correct: Carolyn adores her brother’s dog.

Because “Carolyn” is a singular, female subject, the pronoun should be the singular, feminine “her.”

RUN-ON SENTENCES

A long sentence is not the same as a run-on sentence. A sentence is a run-on if two independent clauses (sections of a sentence that could be complete sentences on their own) are joined without a word to link them or punctuation to separate them.

EXAMPLES

Incorrect: The printing press was one of the most revolutionary inventions of the 15th century. It was invented by Johannes Gutenberg around 1440.

Correct: The printing press was one of the most revolutionary inventions of the 15th century. It was invented by Johannes Gutenberg around 1440.

OR

Correct: The printing press was one of the most revolutionary inventions of the 15th century; it was invented by Johannes Gutenberg around 1440.

COMMA SPLICES

A comma splice is a variant of a run-on sentence. Comma splices occur when two independent clauses are fused with a comma.

EXAMPLES

Incorrect: DNA stands for deoxyribonucleic acid, it is the building block of life.

Correct: DNA stands for deoxyribonucleic acid, and it is the building block of life.

SPLIT SUBJECT/VERB

A subject and verb should never be separated by a comma, though they may be split by a clause or prepositional phrase.

EXAMPLES

Incorrect: The mailman, he carried his bag close to his chest.

Correct: The mailman carried his bag close to his chest.

OR

Correct: The mailman, who was always chased by dogs, carried his bag close to his chest.

PARALLELISM

When making a list, all the items in that list should fit the same format. This is called parallelism.

EXAMPLES

Incorrect: Good teachers say what the rule is, the reasoning behind it, and demonstrate how it works with examples.

Correct: Good teachers say what the rule is, explain the reasoning behind it, and demonstrate how it works with examples.

CAPITALIZATION

The only things that should be capitalized in the middle of a sentence are proper nouns or the word "I." Otherwise, only the first word of the sentence should be capitalized.

EXAMPLES

Incorrect: I was a Barista at a coffeeshop for three years.

Correct: I was a barista at Starbucks for three years.

For specific questions not addressed in this handout, please visit the LETU Writing Center or email WritingCenter@letu.edu.