



PROOFREADING 101

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LESSON THREE

Grammar

How are you doing? Still want to proofread? Stick with it. You *can* learn these rules. Don't be discouraged if you missed several things in your quizzes, especially the second one, since we haven't reviewed all the rules yet.

This lesson covers basic grammar for proofreading. Since there are lots of things we had drilled into us in grade school, we have included common grammar myths as well.

Students often ask about the best way to learn. *Practice*. Study the reference manuals. Ask questions. When you see things you wonder about, look them up—and not just for editing projects or homework. When you see things online, in print, or wherever—even if you hear someone speaking and you're not sure if it's correct—or if something stands out to you or you are not sure you would have done it the same way, look it up. You are more likely to remember it if it interested you enough to seek an answer. And often you will learn even more about something else in that reference section simply by trying to find your original question.

Grab a cup of coffee or a chocolate bar and dive in!

Modifiers

When you start a sentence with a modifying word or phrase, the subject of the sentence is what must be *modified* by that word or phrase. A “dangling modifier” is a phrase that does not clearly and sensibly modify the appropriate word. See *CMOS* 5.115–116.

Example 1: Changing the oil every three thousand miles, *the Mustang* seemed to run better.

Subject of the sentence: the Mustang

Modifying phrase: changing the oil every three thousand miles

A Mustang cannot change its own oil. You could rewrite the sentence like this:

By changing the oil every three thousand miles, **Mark** found his Mustang got much better gas mileage.

Example 2: Walking to work, *the eucalyptus trees* reminded Chris of a Brandilyn Collins novel.

Subject of the sentence: the eucalyptus trees

Modifying phrase: walking to work

Clearly, eucalyptus trees don't walk to work—not even in Brandilyn's novels. You could rewrite the sentence like this:

As Chris walked to work, the eucalyptus trees reminded her of Brandilyn's novel.

Example 3: Slamming on the brakes, *the car* swerved off the road.

Subject of the sentence: the car

Modifying phrase: slamming on the brakes

Now, unless you're editing a Stephen King novel, the car in question probably didn't slam on its own brakes. You could rewrite the sentence like this:

She slammed on the brakes, and the car swerved off the road.

Or

When she slammed on the brakes, the car swerved off the road.

Example 4: Six months after attending the Montrose Christian Writers Conference, *Gail's article* was accepted.

Subject of the sentence: Gail's article

Modifying phrase: Six months after attending the Montrose Christian Writers Conference

Gail's article did not attend the conference. You could rewrite the sentence like this:

Six months after *Gail* attended the Montrose Christian Writers Conference, her article was accepted.

Example 5: Hugging the postman, *Delilah* ripped open the box containing her new novel.

Subject of the sentence: Delilah

Modifying phrase: Hugging the postman

Unless Delilah is an octopus, she could not hug the postman *while* ripping open a box. You could rewrite the sentence like this:

After hugging the postman, Delilah ripped open the box containing her novel.

Example 6: Sharon sent out a proposal for her book on living with horses last week.

Sharon's proposal wasn't for a book about "living with horses last week." You could move that modifying phrase and reword the sentence like this:

Last week Sharon sent out a proposal for her book on living with horses.

Pronouns

Pronouns are wonderful things. Without them, you'd have a lot of repetitious use of nouns. But they can get tricky, because there are several rules a writer needs to keep in mind. See *CMOS* 5.27–67.

Rule 1. Every pronoun needs an antecedent.

The *antecedent* is the noun a pronoun refers to. The antecedent may appear in the same sentence as the pronoun or in an earlier one; occasionally, it comes after.

Here's an easy example: The *boy* threw the *football* to the *girl*. *He* threw *it* to *her*.

The antecedent for *he* is *boy*.

The antecedent for *it* is *football*.

The antecedent for *her* is *girl*.

Pretty simple, right?

But many new writers make the mistake of starting a new chapter or section with a pronoun. If a chapter opens with “He pulled out a gun and aimed it at her head,” the reader will have no idea who these characters are. Chapter and section breaks often indicate a change in time, place, and/or point of view. An author can't expect readers to assume that the people being referred to in the new chapter or section are the same ones who were in the last one. Always make sure new chapters and sections start with nouns, not pronouns.

Rule 2. The antecedent must be a noun.

A pronoun cannot describe any word that's not a noun.

Example: *Christian Retailing* magazine lists the one hundred best-selling books every month. But it never has many fiction titles.

What does the pronoun *it* refer to in this sentence? *It* can't refer to the list because “lists” is used as a verb here, not a noun. But it's not the magazine that lacks fiction titles; it's the list. So, you'd need to reword that sentence. Perhaps something like this:

Christian Retailing magazine's *monthly list* of the one hundred best-selling books never has many fiction titles.

Rule 3. The pronoun must be the correct part of speech for the sentence.

If the pronoun is the subject of a sentence, you must use a subject pronoun.

If the pronoun is the object of a sentence, you must use an object pronoun.

Subject pronouns include *I*, *he*, *she*, *we*, *they*, and *who*. The subject is the one initiating something.

I like mystery novels.

He writes best sellers.

She listens to opera.
We read nonfiction books.
They publish science fiction.
Who reads historical romance?

Object pronouns include *me*, *him*, *her*, *us*, *them*, and *whom*. The object is the recipient of the action in a sentence.

Luke was talking to *me*.
Mary loves *him*.
John loves *her*.
I wrote a book for *them*.
Dad is taking *us* out to dinner.
To *whom* are you speaking?

The possessive pronouns *his*, *her*, *their*, and *our* can be related to either subjects or objects. But the possessive pronoun *my* is only for subjects. Possessive pronoun *mine* is only for objects.

My car hit *their* car.
Their car dented *mine*.

These all sound really obvious. But when you combine a pronoun with another person's name, following proper rules of grammar may create something that doesn't sound right to your ear.

Example: John took Mary and I out to dinner.

That may sound right, but it's not. Why? Because *I* is a *subject* pronoun, not an object pronoun.

"John took Mary and *me* out to dinner" is correct.

How can you tell for sure? Take out the other person and the conjunction. You wouldn't say "John took I out to dinner."

When a pronoun falls at the end of a sentence, it may be difficult to tell if it's a subject or an object. Try to rearrange the sentence to figure out what it should be.

Example: Becky loves romance novels better than me.

Should you use "I" or "me" here? Well, it depends. The trick is to fill in the missing words in the sentence. Which of the following do you mean?

Becky loves romance novels better than *I love romance novels*.
Becky loves romance novels better than *she loves me*.

Rule 4. A pronoun stands for its closest matching antecedent.

The noun closest to the pronoun is usually the correct antecedent.

Example: Tricia wrote an excellent historical romance for the contest, but Hailey submitted a time-travel novel. She won the award.

Who won? Hailey, because she's the noun closest to the pronoun. But since there may be some confusion here, it would be best to reword the sentence by replacing *she* with *Hailey*.

Rule 5. The pronoun must match its antecedent in gender.

A female pronoun (*she, her, hers*) must refer to a female noun.

A male pronoun (*he, him, his*) must refer to a male noun.

Example: Carl wrote a book about faith; Nancy wrote a book about hope. He won a Christy award.

The pronoun *he* refers to *Carl* because that's the antecedent that matches in gender.

Rule 6. A pronoun must match its antecedent in number.

A singular pronoun (*he, she, it, etc.*) must refer to a singular noun. A plural pronoun (*we, they, them, us, etc.*) must refer to a plural noun (or to multiple nouns, like "Sally and Jimmy" or "milk and bread").

Example: Marilyn's son (*singular*) cleaned *his* room.

Example: Millie's daughters (*plural*) cleaned *their* rooms.

Pretty simple, right? But we can run into some problems with this matching business.

Some pronouns are deceptive. The indefinite pronouns *anyone, anybody, everyone, everybody, someone, somebody, no one, and nobody* are singular. The same is true of *either* and *neither*.

Example: Neither of the books have won an award.

Have sounds right when you hear it out loud, but grammatically it's wrong. Because *neither* is singular, you need to use the singular verb *has*.

"*Neither* of the books *has* won an award" is correct.

Example: Someone left their gym bag on the floor.

Is this right or wrong? *Someone* is *singular*, but *their* is *plural*. It used to be incorrect, but now the singular "they" is accepted by *CMOS* for use in informal writing. However, for formal writing, continue to use "they" as plural only. This includes the other third-person-plural pronouns (*them, their, themselves*). See *CMOS* 5.48, 5.256.

Some writers and publishers may have an issue with the singular "they." To avoid it altogether, you could write, "Someone left *a* gym bag on the floor" or "Who left *this* gym bag on the floor?" But it is not wrong to leave the sentence as is. Check the style guide.

In formal writing, the English language doesn't have a singular pronoun that means "him or her." And some people consider using male pronouns when referring to either males or females to be sexist or exclusive.

Example: Every student must see their counselor before the end of the semester.

His would be grammatically correct here. But female students may feel left out if a sentence is worded like that. You could pluralize the noun and the pronoun: "*Students* must see *their* counselors before the end of the semester." (Note: If you pluralize both the noun and the pronoun, you have to make "counselor" plural as well, unless all the students have the same counselor.)

Or you could use the phrase *his or her*: "Every student must see *his or her* counselor before the end of the semester." Unfortunately, replacing generic male pronouns with inclusive ones like *he or she*, *him or her*, *his or hers* can get awkward if they're overused.

Rule 7. A pronoun's usage in the sentence may determine the antecedent.

The proper antecedent may be determined by whether it is the subject or the object in a sentence.

Example: When Amy presented the book proposal to Barbara, she trembled.

Who trembled? *Barbara* is the noun closest to the pronoun. But *Amy* is the subject of the previous sentence. So *Amy* would be the antecedent for *she* here. However, since there may be reader confusion, this sentence should be reworded.

The subject/object match only comes into play if the antecedent for the pronoun isn't obvious from the previous rules. The *gender* and *number* matches take precedence over the *subject/object* match.

Example: Wayne and Carolyn bought a puppy for Kristen. She thanked them with a big hug.

The subject of the first sentence is *Wayne and Carolyn*—a multiple-noun phrase. The object of the sentence is *Kristen*. But since *Kristen* is the only *singular* female antecedent, the subject pronoun *she* refers to Kristen, while the object pronoun *them* refers to *Wayne and Carolyn*.

Rule 8. Avoid ambiguous antecedents.

Don't confuse the reader with references that are unclear or ambiguous.

Example: When Lori and Elizabeth entered the room, Gayle noticed her right away.

Which woman did Gayle notice? It's unclear here.

Example: As Allison drove her car up to the service window, it made a rattling sound.

What does *it* refer to here? The car or the window?

Example: Audrey reached for her glass and drank it in one gulp.

What does *it* refer to here? The *glass*. But she didn't drink the *glass* in one gulp.

Example: They say caffeine is bad for you.

To whom is the word *they* referring? Or *you*, for that matter? Unless the sentence before this clearly identifies the antecedents for these nouns, it's better to use nouns.

Rule 9. A “self” pronoun must be the direct object of a verb or object of a preposition.

“Self” pronouns (*myself, yourself, himself, herself, ourselves, etc.*) can be *reflexive* or *intensive*.

Reflexive pronouns are used when the subject is the same person or thing as the object.

Example: Paul made a fool of himself.

The subject of this sentence is *Paul*. The object—what he made a fool of—is *himself*. Subject and object are the same.

Intensive pronouns emphasize or intensify a noun or pronoun.

Example: Suzie baked that pie herself.

Herself intensifies or emphasizes the subject noun, which is *Suzie*.

Never use a “self” pronoun unless its antecedent appears before it in the same sentence.

Example: The boss invited my wife and myself over for dinner.

Myself may sound more elegant, but it's grammatically incorrect. The sentence should read, “The boss invited my wife and *me* over for dinner.”

The only exception to that rule is if the subject of the sentence is *implied*.

Example: Consider yourself lucky.

You is the implied subject of this sentence. *Yourself* is the object. Meaning: “*You* should consider *yourself* lucky.”

Common Grammar Myths

Myth 1. Never split an infinitive. CMOS 5.108

An *infinitive* is the *to* form of a verb: to go, to holler, to whisper, to study, to *do something*.

Splitting an infinitive means putting a word (usually an adverb) between the *to* and the verb: to *boldly* go, to *loudly* holler, to *quietly* whisper, to *avidly* study.

Aside from the fact that you should avoid using too many *-ly* adverbs anyway, separating the parts of an infinitive can weaken the verb phrase by putting extra emphasis on the adverb and/or interrupt the flow of the sentence. In addition, since so many English teachers have taught this rule, many readers may find split infinitives disconcerting.

Rule of thumb: If it's just as easy to word something in a way that avoids splitting an infinitive, do it—if for no better reason than because some readers, editors, and proofreaders will complain if you don't. However, if you really feel the need to split that infinitive, go ahead and do it.

Myth 2. Never start a sentence with a conjunction. CMOS 5.203

A *conjunction* connects two different thoughts. For example: *and, so, but, if, or, however*. In the past, English teachers have taught students that a sentence that begins with a conjunction is an incomplete fragment, not a complete sentence. And sometimes that's true.

Example: Try to catch me. If you can.

But sentence fragments are also no longer taboo—if they're not overused, confusing, or unclear. Experienced writers may deliberately use an occasional sentence fragment to add emphasis or to create a particular mood.

In many cases, opening with a conjunction does *not* turn a sentence into a fragment; it simply connects the information in the sentence more strongly to the information that comes before it. Beginning a sentence with a conjunction is sometimes the best way to express the sentence's relationship with the previous one.

Like Myth 1, if an alternate wording works just as clearly as starting a sentence with a conjunction, go with the alternate. For example, you could try using a dash between two sentences or sentence fragments. If the effect is the same, do that—as long as you don't overuse the dashes!

Myth 3. Never end a sentence with a preposition. CMOS 5.180

A *preposition* is a word that is combined with a noun to form a modifying phrase. Most prepositions refer to time, space, or position.

after the movie (time)
across the country (space)
at the store (position)

Many students are taught that prepositions should never come at the end of a sentence. However, the “proper” ordering of prepositions can sometimes result in sentences that sound awkward, stilted, or pompous.

A perfect example of this is a story attributed to Winston Churchill. Apparently, one of his books was being checked by an overzealous proofreader who insisted on rewording all his sentences that ended with a preposition. He wrote in the margin, “This is the type of errant pedantry up with which I shall not put.”

As a general rule, try to avoid ending sentences with prepositions. For example: “Where is the library at?” There’s no reason not to take out the *at*. “Where is the library?” makes perfect sense without the preposition.

However, if the only way to avoid sounding awkward is to break the rule, then, by all means, do it. Sometimes a preposition is the best word to end a sentence *with*.

Dialogue

There’s one exception to all the rules of proper grammar. *Dialogue*. For rules about dialogue, see chapter 13 in *CMOS*.

Most people use some improper grammar when they speak. If you write fiction or if you include anecdotes with dialogue in your nonfiction, you might *want* to write certain characters with specific grammatical habits that give the reader insight into his personality or identify a character’s unique voice. You probably wouldn’t have a modern-day teenager or a country bumpkin or an old-timer using impeccable grammar—unless there’s something special about that character, like maybe his mother is a professional author.

However, even well-educated people often break grammar rules in speech, because we tend to say things the way they *sound* right—which is not necessarily always correct.

Using proper grammar can sometimes make a person seem arrogant. For example, “To whom do you wish to speak?” is proper grammar, but “Who do you want to talk to?” is more informal.

Other acceptable times to break the rules:

- When your publisher tells you to
- When proper grammar makes a sentence unclear or awkward

The trick: Know what the grammar rules are, and only break a rule if you are doing so *intentionally*, with a specific purpose in mind.

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Lesson 3 Assignment and Quiz

Phew. That was a lot of information. I hope you are still enjoying this material. Proofreading is very detailed work. Let’s test what you learned.

Remember to *turn off* the automatic spellchecker and grammar checker in Microsoft Word prior to opening the document. Then use Track Changes and Comments to complete it.

In order to receive a Certificate of Completion, you must complete at least one homework assignment and one quiz per lesson. Some students choose to do all of them for more practice, which is highly recommended but not required.