



GRAMMAR 101

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LESSON #6

Correcting Common Errors in Grammar

Introduction

As we move into the last lesson of Grammar 101, let's pause in our study and reflect a little on what we've learned:

- Punctuation marks and how to use them
- Spelling difficulties
- Capitalization rules
- The purpose of italics
- Eight parts of speech

You've come a long way! Each lesson and corresponding assignments you complete bring you closer to your goal of establishing your career as a freelance editor. We have more to learn about polishing manuscripts, so let's continue.

This last lesson will finish off the particulars of grammar you must know to be an editor or proofreader in any field or genre.

Dangling Participles

As authors write their great American novels or pen the passion of their hearts, it's easy to unknowingly employ dangling participles. Every editor must be aware of this common problem, be able to spot them, and know how to correct them.

I hear you asking, "What's a dangling participle? And how do I correct it?"

Before I tell you what a dangling participle is, let's review participles. Remember the Verb Tense chart in Lesson 5? Toward the top of it, I listed the four principal parts of the verb *see*: present (*see*), present participle (*seeing*), past (*saw*), past participle (*seen*). A participle phrase looks like a verb but acts as an adjective, which modifies the noun that follows it. A *participle phrase* begins with a participle.

The following sentence is an example of a participle phrase and indicates that I am doing the hiking and I saw something.

Hiking up the mountain, I saw a grizzly bear and her cubs.

A dangling participle is a participle or phrase that, by its position, modifies a noun other than the one intended. This next construction indicates the grizzly bear is doing the hiking.

Hiking up the mountain, a grizzly bear came into view.

Be on the lookout for sentences that begin with a dependent phrase and are followed by a comma and a passive independent clause. Chances are good that the phrases are dangling. Rewrite, supplying a subject, and make the sentence active.

Wrong: Walking down the path, the pond was seen by the swimmers.

Correct: Walking down the path, the swimmers spotted the pond.

Dangling Modifiers

Similar to a dangling participle, a dangling modifier is a word or phrase that modifies a word not clearly stated in the sentence.

Having completed the project, the Xbox was turned on.

Having completed indicates action. The noun that follows the modifier is being described. So, technically, in this sentence, the Xbox completed the action. But that's silly. This is a situation in which the doer of the action expressed in the participle is not clearly stated; therefore, the phrase is dangling.

The first way to correct a dangling modifier is to ask who or what is the doer of the action. As the above example stands, we don't know who or what completed the action. But if this sentence showed up in a paragraph, I'd likely be able to determine by context who or what is acting. It could read like this:

Having completed the project, Joey turned on the Xbox.

The independent clause (Joey turned on the Xbox) now names both who completed the project and who turned on the Xbox. Remember, the noun being modified (described) follows the modifying phrase.

Another way to correct a dangling modifier is to change the dangling phrase into an introductory clause by naming the doer of the action. This removes the phrase as a modifier.

Wrong: Having dropped out of school, his reading level is fifth grade.

Correct: Because Ben dropped out of school, his reading level is fifth grade.

A third way to correct a dangling modifier is to combine the phrase and independent clause.

Wrong: To raise his score, another test was taken.

Correct: He raised his score by taking another test.

Misplaced Modifiers

I love misplaced modifiers. In the solitary world of freelance editing, misplaced modifiers create a bit of literary humor, such as the following sentence.

Hanging on a nail in the closet, I found my red dress.

This misplaced modifier states that I am hanging on a nail in the closet, and while I was there, I found my red dress.

Here's another example.

She served cake and ice cream to the children on paper plates.

What about the children *not* on paper plates?

The modifier needs to be next to the thing being modified.

Correct: I found my dress hanging on a nail in the closet.

Correct: She served cake and ice cream on paper plates to the children.

Remember my explanation of *only* in the previous lesson? The misplacement of it is an example of what we're covering here.

Squinting Modifiers

A squinting modifier is ambiguous because it can modify either the word, phrase, or clause before it and following it. It's sometimes called a two-way modifier. For example:

Doing sit-ups quickly strengthens the abs.

Employees who miss work frequently are fired.

Can you spot the ambiguity? In the first example, we don't know if *quickly* modifies *doing* or if it modifies *strengthens*. *Frequently* in the second sentence is also ambiguous. Does it modify *miss* or *fired*?

Repositioning the modifier so that there is no mistaking what it modifies eliminates ambiguity.

Quickly doing sit-ups strengthens the abs.

Doing sit-ups strengthens the abs quickly.

Employees who frequently miss work are fired.

Employees who miss work are frequently fired.

Usage

Usage refers to how words are used in writing. The simplest way to address this is to give you a list, though not all-inclusive, of word pairs that are commonly confused.

Accept/Except

Accept means to receive; *except* means to leave out.

Affect/Effect

Affect is a verb that means to influence; *effect* is a noun that means result.

All ready/Already

All ready is a state of readiness; *already* means by or before the present time.

All right/Alright

All right is the only correct spelling. *Alright* is not a word. (Some publishers allow “alright” if it’s used in dialogue.)

All together/Altogether

All together refers to a complete group; *altogether* means completely.

Allude/Elude

Allude is an indirect reference; *elude* is a verb meaning to avoid.

A lot/A lot

A lot is the only correct spelling. No such word as “alot.”

Amount/Number

Amount is used as a general quantity; *number* is used for what can be counted.

Anxious/Eager

To be anxious is to worry about the future; to be eager is to have hopeful excitement.

Anymore/Any more

Anymore is an adverb meaning any longer; *any more* means additional.

Arrested for/Arrested in or on

Using the term *arrested for* could be libelous. *Will was arrested for armed robbery* means that Will committed armed robbery and was arrested for it. But in the United States, Will is innocent until proven guilty. So unless he was convicted for armed robbery, the construction should read: *Will was arrested in connection with [or on suspicion of] armed robbery.*

Assure/Ensure/Insure

Assure means to give confidence to; *ensure* means to make sure, certain, or safe (*assure* and *ensure* are synonyms); *insure* is to make certain by taking preliminary precautions.

A while/Awhile

A while employs an article and a noun; *awhile* is an adverb. You would say *I’ll sleep for a while* OR *I’ll sleep awhile*. But never *I’ll sleep for awhile*.

Bad/Badly

Bad is an adjective (modifies only nouns or pronouns: *I feel bad*); *badly* is an adverb and describes how one does the action of the verb. It also means to a great or intense degree.

Blond/Blonde

Blond is a noun that refers to a male with blond hair.

Blond is a noun that refers to the color of hair that is yellowish brown to grayish yellow.

Blond is an adjective that describes the color of hair.

Blonde is a noun that refers to a female with blond hair.

In our rush toward gender neutrality, this distinction between male *blond* and female *blonde* is used less often. I like the distinction because if I read something such as “The blonde stepped into the elevator,” I know it’s a female. Without the spelling distinction, more words are needed to let the readers know whether it’s a female or male.

Capital/Capitol

Capital as a noun refers to the uppermost part of a column; the possession of goods, including money, stocks, assets; advantage or gain; the city that is the seat of government; the uppercase letters of the alphabet.

Capital as an adjective means punishable by death, chief in importance or influence, relating to assets, excellent.

Capitol is the building in which a legislative body meets.

Compare to/Compare with

To compare something to something else is to point out that they are alike; to compare something with something else is to point out their differences, similarities, or both.

Criterion/Criteria

Criterion is singular, and *criteria* is plural. More often than not, *criteria* is used as singular, but that is incorrect.

Data

Data is the plural form for *datum*, but its use as singular seems to be entrenched so deeply that *datum* “sounds” wrong to most American ears.

Different from/Different than

Different from is used in direct comparisons: My hat is different from my sister’s.

Different than is used in indirect comparisons: Times are different than what they used to be.

Disinterested/Uninterested

Disinterested means neutral or impartial; *uninterested* means not interested.

Dose/Dosage

Dose is the quantity of medicine administered at a time: one pill every four hours.

Dosage is the determination of the size, frequency, and number of doses.

Each other/One another

Each other is used with two people or things; *one another* is used with three or more.

Emigrate/Immigrate

Emigrate means to leave one's country to live elsewhere; *immigrate* means to come into a country and live there.

Eminent/Imminent

Eminent means conspicuous or prominent; *imminent* means impending, about to occur.

Farther/Further

Farther refers to a measurable distance; *further* is an adverb that means in addition or to a greater degree. It is also a verb that means to promote.

Fewer/Less than

Use *fewer* with items that can be counted; use *less* with a quantity of a substance.

Imply/Infer

Imply means to suggest; *infer* means to draw a conclusion based on evidence.

In/Into

In is used for a location within; *into* refers to the motion of moving from outside to inside. If you say, "I jumped in the car," it means that while you were in the car you jumped, but if you say, "I jumped into the car," you indicate that with a jumping motion, you went from outside the car to inside of it.

Lie/Lay

Lie is an intransitive verb that means to recline or to remain; *lay* is a transitive verb that means to put or place something.

Media

Like data, *media* is misused as a singular noun. *Media* is the plural of *medium*. It requires a plural verb.

On to/Onto

On to is an adverb followed by the preposition to: He grabbed on to my arm. Too many times I see this erroneous construction: He grabbed onto my arm. *Onto* indicates the motion to a position on or on top of something—The rabbit hopped onto the hutch—or to be aware of something—I'm onto your scheme.

Principal/Principle

Principal means head or leading figure; *principle* is a rule, law.

Raise/Rise

Raise is to cause something to rise and requires an object; *rise* is to go up.

Some time/Sometime

Some is an adjective and *time* is a noun. The phrase refers to an amount of time. *Sometime* is an adverb and means at some unspecified time. *Sometime* can also be an adjective meaning former or erratic (the sometime farmer).

That/Who

Use *that* in restrictive relative clauses that refer to things, but *who* refers to people.

Try and/Try to

Try and is incorrect. *Try* is one action. Use *try to* instead.

Use/Usage

Use is a noun meaning the act of employing, individual habit or group custom, particular service, benefit in law, and the privilege of using something.

Use is a verb that means to put into action, consume, behave toward, or stand.

Usage is a noun meaning a firmly established practice or procedure, or the action of using.

You might want to print out this list and keep it handy. I guarantee you will consistently be faced with correcting usage errors.

Parallelism

We humans find symmetry pleasing. Our ears enjoy the harmony of a musical composition. Balance in color draws the eye and evokes emotions. When picking out the family Christmas tree, who looks for the three-sided or lopsided Charlie Brown–style tree? Have you ever tried to put the star or angel topper on a tree with two leaders? Instead, we are drawn to the tree with one leader and uniform branch spacing, color, and length because those features are visually pleasing.

When reading, we use our eyes to see the words and our inner voices to hear the words. We need this same symmetry or balance when writing. It's called parallelism, which orders like element with like element. Using parallelism with words, phrases, clauses, and sentences creates a flow of seamless ideas. Without parallelism, there is no flow; rather, the reader is forced to decipher choppy, jarring writing.

Let's study this basic stylistic device called parallelism. Nouns and nouns are parallel; infinitives and infinitives are parallel; prepositions and prepositions are parallel; gerunds and gerunds are parallel, and so on. But nouns and infinitives are not parallel; nor are gerunds and nouns, etc. Following are several examples.

Infinitive and gerund are not parallel:

Wrong: The children's instructions were *to eat* lunch and the *cleaning* of the dishes.

Correct: The children's instructions were *to eat* lunch and *to wash* the dishes.

Gerund and noun are not parallel:

Wrong: You can earn extra money by *washing* the car or the *removal* of the scrap lumber.

Correct: You can earn extra money by *washing* the car or *removing* the scrap lumber.

Noun and clause are not parallel:

Wrong: The president is responsible for *executing* the law and that he *represents* the United States to world leaders.

Correct: The president is responsible for *executing* the law and *representing* the United States to world leaders.

Items in a list should be parallel:

Wrong: I like *fishing*, *boating*, and *to hike*.

Correct: I like *fishing*, *boating*, and *hiking*.

An article (*a*, *an*, and *the*) or preposition that applies to a series is either used before the first item or repeated before each item.

Wrong: The purpose of the party was to give gifts, dance, and to sing.

Correct: The purpose of the party was to give gifts, dance, and sing.

Correct: The purpose of the party was to give gifts, to dance, and to sing.

Coordinating conjunctions and correlative expressions (*both . . . and*, *not only . . . but also*, and *either . . . or*) are placed immediately before a parallel element. (See *CMOS* 5.198–202.)

Wrong: By winning the championship, the team **not only** won *the trophy* **but also** *the admiration* of the townspeople.

Correct: By winning the championship, the team won **not only** *the trophy* but also *the admiration* of the townspeople.

Repeat any word to make the parallelism clear.

Wrong: My father is excellent *in writing* and *overseeing* editors. (Unclear. Is he excellent in writing editors?)

Correct: My father is excellent *in writing* and *in overseeing* editors.

Sometimes you'll fudge a bit on absolute parallelism because it is not always possible or wanted.

The martyr went silently and with dignity. (*Silently* is an adverb; the prepositional phrase *with dignity* functions as an adverb. You wouldn't say *dignifiedly*.)

Summary

In a short amount of time, we covered several common grammar errors:

- Dangling participles
- Dangling modifiers
- Misplaced modifiers
- Squinting modifiers
- Usage
- Parallelism

In each of the six lessons of Grammar 101, we covered a lot of territory. Like a hunter on safari who needs myriad equipment to survive, so do editors and proofreaders need a vast knowledge of the English language to be successful in their jobs.

The more you apply the skills you learn in this course and others offered by The PEN Institute, the more those skills will become second nature to you. The first year of my editing career, I spent a lot of time looking up things in *CMOS*: “Does this structure call for a hyphen, an en dash, or an em dash?” and “Is this term capitalized?” were questions I constantly asked and found answers to in my style manual. I dog-eared the pages on documentation. I could go on and on about how often I had to stop and look up something. Of course, I don’t have to look up those items now because I’ve increased and sharpened my skills through study and practice. And the same will happen for you.

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LESSON #6 ASSIGNMENTS

Access the Lesson 6 Assignments file.