

Four Common Grammar Errors - And Strategies to Fix Them

* The following errors—identified in nationwide research by Andrea A. Lunsford and Karen Lunsford—are trouble spots for many writers. For a larger list, see <https://hume.stanford.edu/resources/student-resources/writing-resources/grammar-resources/to-p-20-errors-undergraduate-writing>

Common Errors

1. Wrong Word (with some strategies that are also useful for correcting spelling errors)

- **Strategy 1: Speak and Write**

It's always a good idea to think about how or why you might have used the wrong word. Were you in a rush (with little time to check your work)? Or did the autocorrect function make changes you did not intend? Or were you trying to use a new word to sound impressive (without knowing exactly what it means)? Different causes require different solutions.

Read out loud, slowly. Simply slowing down will help you catch a lot of mistakes.

Read again. This time, circle all the words that you don't use in your everyday conversation. Can you define these words? If not, look the word up (or replace it with a simpler word).

- **Strategy 2: Use your Computer**

Use the “find” function in WORD to locate words like or its/it's or their/they're.

Any time you find its or it's, try substituting it is. Any time you find their, try substituting they are. If the sentence makes more sense with the words spelled out, make that change.

Consider turning off the Autocorrect function in Word. Under the main Word menu, choose Preferences and explore the Authoring and Proofing tools. When you use the spell checker manually, pause and look up words that you are not sure about. (The machine sometimes makes mistakes!)

If you know you always have trouble with a particular word, be sure it's spelled correctly in your computer's dictionary. Search for that particular word.

- **Strategy 3: Visit the Writing Studio**

Consult with the Eberl Writing Studio. Peer consultants can help you practice the other strategies listed here. They can also answer questions if you aren't sure if you are using a strategy correctly. As a bonus, they can often suggest new resources.

You can find contact information and other resources here:
speakwrite.wvu.edu/writing-studio

- **Example:**

The child suffered from a severe **allegory** to peanuts.
Yikes! Allegory was the spell check's autocorrection for "**allergy.**"

2. Missing Comma after an Introductory Element

- **Strategy 1: Speak and Write**

Think about the purpose of introductory elements. They usually set up a condition (like time or place), mark a transition, or give important context. Now, read your paper out loud. Note the places where you pause. Pay particular attention when you **START** a sentence with words that:

- Signal time (Before . . . After. . . Since. . . During. . .)
- Signal place (Above. . . Across. . . In front of. . . Between. . .)

- Or suggest a sequence (First. . . . In conclusion. . . . Because. In contrast. . . .)

- **Strategy 2: Use your Computer**

Search for “introductory” words using the “find” feature on WORD. Be sure to use the ADVANCED search function so you can match case.

You want to look for these words at the START of sentences, which means they will begin with a capital letter. Once you find these key words, see if you have a comma a few words away (after you set up the condition or give important context). Some common introductory words:

- Before . . . After. . . . Since. . . . During.
- Above. . . Across. . . In front of. . . .
- Between. . . First. . . . In conclusion
- Because... In contrast ...

- **Strategy 3: Visit the Writing Studio**

Have a Writing Studio consultant read your paper out loud while you follow along. Sometimes it's easier to hear pauses when someone else reads your words.

Peer consultants can also help you practice the other strategies listed here. They can also answer questions if you aren't sure if you are using a strategy correctly.

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- **Example**

Because I revised, my writing improved.

Insert a comma after the important context is established. In the sentence above, the start of the sentence explains why my writing improved. The comma goes after the word revised.

Because I revised, my writing improved.

3. Incomplete or Missing Documentation

Strategy 1: Speak and Write

As always, it is a good idea to think about why you need to document your sources completely and accurately.

Citations are used to show respect for the work that others have done. They also operate as reading guides that others can read more about a topic. And citations keep us honest as writers.

Reread the paper and note places where you summarize, paraphrase, or quote someone else's ideas. Do you give credit by noting the author and date or page number of your source? If you are using someone else's words exactly, do you signal that with quotation marks?

At the end of your paper, do you list all your sources alphabetically and completely? Would readers have enough information to find your sources by themselves?

● Strategy 2: Use your Computer

There are lots of online guides to help you learn and check the conventions for giving credit to others. Here are a few good resources:

- 2-minute video on **citation** from the University of North Carolina: <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/how-we-cite/>
- The WVU Libraries guide to **avoiding plagiarism**: <https://library.wvu.edu/teach-learn/plagiarism-avoidance-resources>
- Purdue University's guide to **MLA citations**: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>
- Purdue University's guide to **APA citations**: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/10/>

Use the “citations” feature on WORD to organize and create references in the selected format (APA, MLA, etc....) or use an online bibliography generator (such as the WVU Libraries' RefWorks). Just be sure that you know the conventions well enough to double-check the computer version! Computers are great, but humans are still better.

- **Strategy 3: Visit the Writing Studio**

Have a Writing Studio consultant read your paper with you to help you look specifically for missing citations or for places that do not sound like your voice or style.

Peer consultants can also help you practice the other strategies listed here.

They can also answer questions about which citation style to use for a particular paper (although it is also good to ask your instructor).

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- **Example**

According to one sources, William Shakespeare is the greatest playwright who ever lived (Krocker 21).

Note the necessary parenthetical documentation for the “one source”.

4. Vague Pronoun Reference

- **Strategy 1: Speak and Write**

Pronouns serve as a short-hand to refer back to specific people, places, or things.

Read your paper and circle your pronouns. (this/that/these/those also they/them/he/she/we/us). Who or what are you referring to when you use one of those words? If you do need to clarify, simply put in a more specific name.

Tip: Check for this/that/these/those/they first!

- **Strategy 2: Use your Computer**

Use the “find” feature on WORD to locate all pronouns such as this/that/these/those/they.

Tip: Search for each individual word. Do not try the whole list of pronouns at once or you will confuse yourself and the computer!

Will readers be able to tell who or what you have in mind when they read the pronoun? If so, no change. If it's not clear: specify!

- **Strategy 3: Visit the Writing Studio**

Peer consultants can also read your paper for pronouns. Ask your peer to circle unclear pronouns such as is/that/these/those/they as well as them/he/she/we/us You can then work together to name the specific person, place, or thing you have in mind.

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- **Example**

This helps.

“This” could refer to almost anything. Ask yourself, who or what helps? Then add a noun--or reword the sentence:

"This strategy helps."