

GRAMMAR RULES

Tip: Learn to develop an “ear” for good grammar by reading good newspapers, books, and documents. Listening to the radio or television may not be as productive. TV and radio announcers tend to “abuse” the language more often.

Rule #1- The subject and verb must agree in person and number. Errors in agreement are among the most common we make. Singular subjects require singular verbs. *Robert is late for the hearing.* Plural or compound subjects require plural verbs. *Robert and Bill are late for work.* A subject of the first person requires a verb of the first person. A subject of the third person requires a verb of the third person. *I am confused by the new policy.* *She is confused by the new policy.*

Agreement problems occur in two areas:

Identifying the subject- Phrases between the verb and the subject do not affect the number of the verb. (See “Fix It” #1)

Determining the number- a number of rules apply:

- ✓ Two subjects joined by *and* require a plural verb. (Fix It #3)
- ✓ There are exceptions; a compound subject thought of as a unit uses a singular verb. (Fix It #4)
- ✓ Collective nouns (family, majority, personnel) can be both. When the idea of oneness predominates, use the singular verb. (Fix It #6)
- ✓ If the collective noun refers to individuals or items within the group, use the plural verb. (A group of placement records and protective service case files were requested by the field representative.)
- ✓ Use the singular verb with nouns that are plural in form but singular in meaning. (Fix It #7)
- ✓ Pronouns
 1. *Another, each, every, either neither, and one* are always singular. As are *anybody, anything, anyone, nobody nothing, and no one.*
 2. *Both, few, several, many, and others* are always plural. (“Many are called, but few are chosen.”)
 3. *All, none, any, some, more, and most* are either singular or plural depending on how they are used.
 4. Relative pronouns like *who, which, and that* are singular or plural depending on what word they stand for. . . . In the following example, does *who* refer to *those* or to *one* ? She is *one* of *those who follow* directions well. The example uses the formal choice, where *who* stands for *those*, not for *one*.
 5. Subject and pronoun should agree in number. (Fix It #8 is *it’s*, not *their*.)

Rule #2- Express parallel thought in grammatically parallel terms.

- ✓ Use a gerund with a gerund, an infinitive with an infinitive, etc. (For example, *To swim is better exercise than skiing* would be better said as, *Swimming is better exercise than skiing*.)
- ✓ Use parallel construction in lists, headings, and outlines. If you use active voice, continue with active voice . . . if you start with a strong verb, make all phrases start with a strong verb. . . if you use a preposition in a phrase, use it in all. (“Fix It #9)
- ✓ Use parallel construction to improve the flow of ideas or add impact. This helps the reader to see the similarity in content or function. (Notice how Lincoln used parallel construction, “. . .government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”)
- ✓ Use parallel construction to avoid sexist language in handling names and titles in writing. (Mr. Palmer, Mr. Sands, and Irene were providing services. WRONG! George, Harry, and Irene were . . . , or Mr. Palmer, Mr. Sands, and Ms. Nelson were. . .)

Rule #3- Avoid misplaced and dangling modifiers.

Misplaced and dangling modifiers can substantially change the message received by the reader. In our work, being understood is critical to getting the job done. Your written record, report summary, or petition stands on it’s own merit. If you’ve confused your message, you’ve likely confused your reader!

- ✓ Place a modifier close to the word or phrase it modifies. (*We lost almost all of the appeals* is quite different from *We almost lost all of the appeals*. Remember to place the adverb immediately preceding the word it modifies.)
- ✓ Reword the sentence if the meaning isn’t clear. Misplaced modifiers can create some amazing mental images! (*The caseworker saw a picture of the grandmother hanging by the fireplace.* Huh??)
- ✓ Make sure that the object, person, etc. being modified is not left out of the sentence. Dangling modifiers are words or phrases that modify nothing in particular in the sentence. Often, they occur when what is modified is something implied or suggested. (Fix It #10. How about another? *In thumbing through the magazine, my eyes noticed a colorful restaurant ad.* Eyes don’t thumb through magazines!)
- ✓ Exceptions to the rule. *All things considered, Strictly speaking, Admittedly, Assuming you’re right* and *Judging by the record* are so useful that they are considered acceptable. *Hopefully*, (as in *Hopefully, we’ll be done on time.*) is still considered inappropriate as a modifier. Avoid it’s use in that sense.)
- ✓ **TIP:** Draw a circle around the modifier, then connect it to the word it modifies with a line. If they are far removed, move them close together. Then check to see if the modifier could possibly modify another word in the sentence. If so, move or revise it so that it modifies only one word.

Rule #4- Avoid double negatives in writing and speech.

We all know that two negatives cancel each other and make the statement a positive. There are some exceptions used for humor or a subtle change in meaning, but generally double negatives should be avoided.

- ✓ Complicated negative constructions are tiresome to the reader. (Fix It #11) Use the positive expression of the thought for clarity.
- ✓ Watch for negation even when the words *no* or *not* aren't used in the sentence. *The absence of compassion was noticeably lacking* is correctly stated as, *Compassion was lacking* or *The absence of compassion was noticeable.*

Adapted from: Write Right, Venolia and The St. Martin's Handbook, Lunsford and Connors

Many topics are left uncovered in this basic review of grammar rules. Find a good writing skills book at your local book store, on-line book store, used book store, or library. Better communication is not just a job skill, it's something you will use throughout your life.

Notes on improving my use of grammar: