

AMA Manual of Style

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Grammar

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A clear understanding of grammar is basic to good writing. Many excellent grammar books provide a detailed discussion of specific principles (see 25.3, Resources, General Style and Usage). In this section, the focus is on how to avoid common grammatical and writing errors. The content of this chapter is organized from the smallest parts of speech (eg, nouns and pronouns) to larger structures (eg, sentences and paragraphs)...

Pronouns

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Pronouns replace nouns. In this replacement, the antecedent must be clear and the pronoun must agree with the antecedent in number and gender. Note: The possessive pronoun *its* should not be confused with the contraction *it's* (see also , Punctuation, Apostrophe, Possessive Pronouns). Care must be taken to use the correct case of personal pronouns: subjective (the pronoun is the subject of the phrase or clause) or objective (the pronoun is the object of the phrase or clause). She was assigned to the active intervention group. (She is the subject.) Collect all the samples and give them to her. (Her is the object.)

Modifiers

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A modifier describes another word or word group. Words, phrases (groups of words without a subject or predicate, usually introduced by a preposition or conjunction), and clauses (groups of words with a subject and verb within a compound or complex sentence) may all be modifiers. An adjective modifies a noun or a pronoun. An adverb modifies a verb, an adjective, another adverb, or a clause. Clauses or phrases may serve as adjectives or

adverbs. Misplaced modifiers result from failure to make clear what is being modified. Illogical or ambiguous placement of a word or phrase can usually be avoided by placing

Nouns

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Nouns (words that name a person, place, thing, or idea) may serve as subjects or objects. Although in English nouns can be used as modifiers, overuse of noun modifiers can lead to a lack of clarity. Purists may demand stricter rules on usage, but, as with the use of nouns as verbs (see , Correct and Preferred Usage, Back-formations), the process of linguistic change is inevitable, and grammatical rigor must be tempered by judgment and common sense. In *The Careful Writer*, Bernstein advises the use of no more than 2 polysyllabic noun modifiers per noun for the sake of clarity. However, long

Verbs

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Verbs express an action, an occurrence, or a mode of being. They have voice, mood, and tense. In the active voice, the subject does the acting; in the passive voice, the subject is acted on. In general, authors should use the active voice, except in instances in which the actor is unknown or the interest focuses on what is acted on (as in the following example of passive voice). He was shot in the abdomen and within 10 minutes was brought to the emergency department. If the actor is mentioned in the sentence, the active voice is preferred over the passive voice. Verbs may

Diction

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Diction, or word choice, is important for any writing to be understood by its intended audience. In scientific writing, concrete and specific language is preferred over the abstract and general. Homonyms are words that sound alike but are spelled differently and have different meanings. They are easily confused, and computer spell-check programs are unable to differentiate them. Common examples include affect/effect, accept/except, altar/alter, assistance/assistants, cite/site/sight, council/counsel, its/it's, patience/patients, peace/piece, peak/peek/pique, pleural/plural, principal/principle, and your/you're. (See

also , Correct and Preferred Usage, Correct and Preferred Usage of Common Words and Phrases.)Some language is best avoided in material written for a professional or

Subject-Verb Agreement

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The subject and verb must agree in number; use a singular subject with a singular verb and a plural subject with a plural verb. Unfortunately, this simple rule is often violated, especially in complex sentences. Plural nouns take plural verbs and singular nouns take singular verbs, even if a phrase ending in a plural noun follows a singular subject or if a phrase ending in a singular noun follows a plural subject. A review of all patients with grade 3 tumors was undertaken in the university hospital. [The subject in this sentence is review. Ignore all modifying prepositional phrases that follow a

Parallel Construction

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Parallel construction can be used to build a sentence or emphasize a point. Parallelism may rely on accepted cues (either/or, neither/nor, not only/but also, both/and). All elements of the parallelism that appear on one side of the coordinating conjunction should match corresponding elements on the other side. Note: Either/or is used with only 2 comparators (use with more than 2 items is considered nonstandard). Note: Avoid the use of nor when the first negative is expressed by not or no. The conjunction than often introduces an abridged expression (eg, “You are younger than I [am young]).” Correct placement of than is important to avoid

The Paragraph

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A paragraph is a cohesive group of sentences. It presents a thought or several related thoughts. Each paragraph should be long enough to stand alone but short enough to hold the reader’s attention and then direct that attention to the next thought. Too many short paragraphs are jarring to the reader, whereas too many long paragraphs strain the reader’s attention. Sentences within a single paragraph should use parallel structure and consistent tense as much as possible. Transitions are words or phrases that signal a connection among

ideas. Transitions build bridges between paragraphs (and between sentences) and help the text flow. To

Sentence Fragments

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A sentence must have at minimum a subject and a verb; it also usually contains modifiers. Sentence fragments, which lack a subject or a verb, should not be used in scientific or technical writing (except within the structured abstract; see , Manuscript Preparation, Abstract). Occasionally, writers of prose and poetry use sentence fragments intentionally, for effect. Her affect signaled depression. Utter depression. In scientific writing, these fragments are likely to be unintentional and are definitely inappropriate.