CHAPTER 2

WRITING COMPETENTLY

2.1 GUIDELINES FOR THE COMPETENT WRITER

Good writing places your thoughts in your reader's mind in exactly the way you want them to be there. It tells your reader just what you want him to know without revealing anything you do not wish to say. That may sound odd, but the fact is that writers have to be careful not to let unwanted messages slip into their writing. For example, look at the following passage, taken from a paper analyzing the impact of a worker-retraining program. Hidden within the prose is a message that jeopardizes the paper's success. Can you detect the message?

> Recent articles written on the subject of dislocated workers have had little to say about the particular problems dealt with in this paper. Since few of these articles focus on the problem at the local level.

Chances are, when you reached the end of the second "sentence," you sensed something missing, a gap in logic or coherence, and your eye ran back through both sentences to find the place where things went wrong. The second sentence is actually not a sentence at all. It does have certain features of a sentence—a subject, for example (*few*), and a verb (*focus*), but its first word (*Since*) subordinates the entire clause that follows, taking away its ability to stand on its own as a complete idea. The second "sentence," which is properly called a subordinate clause, merely fills in some information about the first sentence, explaining why recent articles about dislocated workers fail to deal with problems discussed in the present paper.

This sort of error is commonly called a sentence fragment, and it conveys to the reader a message that no writer wants to send: that the writer either is careless or—worse—has not mastered the language she is using. Language errors, such as fragments, misplaced commas, or shifts in verb tense send up little red

flags in the reader's mind. The result is that the reader loses a little of his concentration on the issue being discussed. He becomes distracted and begins to wonder about the language competency of the writer. The writing loses effectiveness. Remember that whatever goal you set for your paper—whether you want it to persuade, describe, analyze, or speculate—you must also set another goal: to display language competence. Without it, your paper will not completely achieve its other aims. Language errors spread doubt like a virus; they jeopardize all the hard work you have done on your paper.

Credibility in the job market depends on language competence. Anyone who doubts this should remember the beating that Dan Quayle took in the press when he was vice president of the United States for misspelling the word potato at a Trenton, New Jersey, spelling bee. His error caused a storm of humiliating publicity for the hapless Quayle, and contributed to an impression of his general incompetence.

Although they may seem minor, these sorts of language errors—which are often called surface errors—can be extremely damaging in certain kinds of writing. Surface errors come in a variety of types, including misspellings, punctuation problems, grammar errors, and the inconsistent use of abbreviations, capitalization, and numerals. They are an affront to your reader's notion of correctness—and therein lies one of the biggest problems with surface errors. Different audiences tolerate different levels of correctness. You already know that you can get away with surface errors in, say, a letter to a friend, who will not judge you harshly for them, while those same errors in a job application letter might eliminate you from consideration for the job. Correctness depends to an extent on context.

Another problem is that the rules governing correctness shift over time. What would have been an error to your grandmother's generation—the splitting of an infinitive, for example, or the ending of a sentence with a preposition—is taken in stride today by most readers. So how do you write correctly when the rules shift from person to person and over time? Following are some tips.

2.1.1 Consider Your Audience

One of the great risks of writing is that even the simplest of choices you make regarding wording or punctuation can sometimes prejudice your audience against you in ways that may seem unfair. For example, look again at the old grammar "rule" forbidding the splitting of infinitives. After decades of counseling students to never split an infinitive (something this sentence has just done), composition experts now concede that a split infinitive is not a grammar crime. But suppose you have written a position paper trying to convince your city council of the need to hire security personnel for the library, and half of the council members—the people you wish to convince—remember their eighth-grade grammar teacher's outdated warning about splitting infinitives. How will they respond when you tell them, in your introduction, that "librarians are ordered to always accompany visitors to the rare book room because of the threat of vandalism"? How much of their attention have you suddenly lost because of their automatic

recollection of a nonrule? It is possible, in other words, to write correctly and still offend your readers' notions of language competence.

Make sure that you tailor the surface features of your writing to the level of competency that your readers require. When in doubt, take a conservative approach. The same goes for the level of formality you should assume. Your audience might be just as distracted by contractions as by a split infinitive.

2.1.2 Aim for Consistency

When dealing with a language question for which there are different answers—such as whether to place a comma after the second item in a series of three ("The mayor's speech addressed taxes, housing for the poor, and the job situation.")—always use the same strategy. If, for example, you avoid splitting one infinitive, avoid splitting all infinitives in your paper.

2.1.3 Have Confidence in What You Already Know about Writing

It is easy for unpracticed writers to allow their occasional mistakes to discourage them about their writing ability. But most of what we know about writing is right. For example, we are all capable of writing sentences that are grammatically sound—even if we cannot identify the grammar rules by which we achieve coherence. Most writers who worry about their chronic errors have fewer than they think. Becoming distressed about errors makes writing more difficult. In fact, you already know more about grammar than you think you do. As various composition theorists have pointed out, the word *grammar* has several definitions. One meaning is "the formal patterns in which words must be arranged in order to convey meaning." We learn these patterns very early in life and use them spontaneously without thinking about them. Our understanding of grammatical patterns is extremely sophisticated, despite the fact that few of us can actually cite the rules that the patterns follow.

Hartwell (1985:111) tested grammar learning by asking native English-speakers of different ages and levels of education, including high school teachers, to arrange these words in natural order:

> French the young girls four

Everyone he asked could produce the natural order for this phrase: "the four young French girls." Yet none of Hartwell's respondents said they knew the rule that governs the order of the words.

2.1.4 Eliminate Chronic Errors

The question then arises: If just thinking about our errors has a negative effect on our writing, how do we learn to write with greater accuracy? One important way is simply to write as often as possible. Give yourself practice in putting your

thoughts into written shape, and get lots of practice in revising and proofing your work. And as you write and revise, be honest—and patient—with yourself. Chronic errors are like bad habits; getting rid of them takes time. You probably know of one or two problem areas in your writing that you could have eliminated but have not done so. Instead, you have "fudged" your writing at the critical points, relying on half-remembered formulas from past English classes or trying to come up with logical solutions to your writing problems. (Warning: Rules governing the English language are not always logical.) You may have simply decided that comma rules are unlearnable or that you will never understand the difference between the verbs *lay* and *lie*. And so you guess—and get the rule wrong a good part of the time. What a shame, when just a little extra work would give you mastery over those few gaps in your understanding and boost your confidence as well.

Instead of continuing with this sort of guesswork, instead of living with the gaps, why not face the problem areas now and learn the rules that have heretofore escaped you? What follows is a discussion of those surface features of a paper in which errors most commonly occur. You will probably be familiar with most—if not all—of the rules discussed, but there may be a few you have not yet mastered. Now is the time to do so.

2.2 SOME RULES OF PUNCTUATION AND GRAMMAR

2.2.1 *Apostrophes*

An apostrophe is used to show possession; when you wish to say that something belongs to someone or to another thing, you add either an apostrophe and an *s* or an apostrophe alone to the word that represents the owner.

When the owner is singular (a single person or thing), the apostrophe precedes an added *s:*

According to Mr. Pederson's secretary, the board meeting has been canceled.

The school's management team reduced crime problems last year.

Somebody's briefcase was left in the classroom.

The same rule applies if the word showing possession is a plural that does not end in *s:*

The women's club provided screening services for at-risk youth and their families.

Professor Logan has proven himself a tireless worker for children's rights.

When the word expressing ownership is a plural ending in *s,* the apostrophe follows the *s:*

The new procedure was discussed at the youth workers' conference.

There are two ways to form the possessive for two or more nouns:

1. To show joint possession (both nouns owning the same thing or things), the last noun in the series is possessive:

   Billy and Richard's first draft was completed yesterday.

2. To indicate that each noun owns an item or items individually, each noun must show possession:

   Professor Wynn's and Professor Camacho's speeches took different approaches to the same problem.

The apostrophe is important, an obvious statement when you consider the difference in meaning between the following two sentences:

Be sure to pick up the psychiatrist's things on your way to the airport.

Be sure to pick up the psychiatrists' things on your way to the airport.

In the first of these sentences, you have only one psychiatrist to worry about, while in the second, you have at least two!

2.2.2 *Capitalization*

When to capitalize. Following is a brief summary of some hard-to-remember capitalization rules.

Rule 1: You may, if you choose, capitalize the first letter of the first word in a complete sentence that follows a colon (but remember to be consistent throughout your paper).

Our instructions are explicit: Do not allow anyone into the conference without an identification badge.

Rule 2: Capitalize proper nouns (nouns naming specific people, places, or things) and proper adjectives (adjectives made from proper nouns). A common noun following the proper adjective is usually not capitalized, nor is a common adjective preceding the proper adjective (such as *a, an,* or *the*):

Proper Nouns	**Proper Adjectives**
England	English sociologists
Iraq	the Iraqi educator
Shakespeare	a Shakespearean tragedy

Proper nouns include the following:

- *Names of famous monuments and buildings:* the Washington Monument, the Empire State Building, the Library of Congress
- *Historical events, eras, and certain terms concerning calendar dates:* the Civil War, the Dark Ages, Monday, December, Columbus Day

- *Parts of the country:* North, Southwest, Eastern Seaboard, the West Coast, New England (Note that when words like *north, south, east, west,* and *northwest* are used to designate direction rather than geographical region, they are not capitalized: "We drove east to Boston and then made a tour of the East Coast.")
- *Words referring to race, religion, and nationality:* Islam, Muslim, Caucasian, White (or white), Asian, African American, Black (or black), Slavic, Arab, Jewish, Hebrew, Buddhism, Buddhists, Southern Baptists, the Bible, the Koran, American
- *Names of languages:* English, Chinese, Latin, Sanskrit
- *Titles of corporations, institutions, businesses, universities, and organizations:* Dow Chemical, General Motors, the National Endowment for the Humanities, University of Tennessee, Colby College, Kiwanis Club, American Association of Retired Persons, the Oklahoma State Senate (Note: Some words once considered proper nouns or adjectives have, over time, become common: french fries, pasteurized milk, arabic numerals, italics, panama hat.)

Rule 3: Titles of individuals should be capitalized when they precede a proper name; otherwise, titles are usually not capitalized.

The committee honored Chairperson Furmanski.

The committee honored the chairperson from the sociology department.

We phoned Doctor MacKay, who arrived shortly afterward.

We phoned the doctor, who arrived shortly afterward.

A story on Queen Elizabeth's health appeared in yesterday's paper.

A story on the queen's health appeared in yesterday's paper.

Pope John Paul's visit to Colorado was a public relations success.

The pope's visit to Colorado was a public relations success.

When not to capitalize. In general, do not capitalize nouns when your reference is nonspecific. For example, you would not capitalize the phrase *the senator,* but you would capitalize *Senator Smith.* The second reference is as much a title as it is a term of identification, while the first reference is a mere identifier. Likewise, there is a difference in degree of specificity between the phrase *the state treasury* and the *Texas State Treasury.*

Note that the meaning of a term may change somewhat depending on capitalization. What, for example, might be the difference between a Democrat and a democrat? (When capitalized, the word refers to a member of a specific political party; when not capitalized, the word refers to someone who believes in a democratic form of government.)

Capitalization depends to some extent on the context of your writing. For example, if you are writing a policy analysis for a specific corporation, you may capitalize words and phrases—Board of Directors, Chairperson of the Board, the Institute—that would not be capitalized in a paper written referring to boards of directors, chairpersons, and institutes in general. Likewise, in some contexts it is not unusual to see titles of certain powerful officials capitalized even when not accompanying a proper noun:

The President's visit to the Oklahoma City bombing site was considered timely.

In this case the reference is to a specific president, President Clinton.

2.2.3 Colons

There are uses for the colon that we all know. For example, a colon can separate the parts of a statement of time (4:25 A.M.), separate chapter and verse in a biblical quotation (John 3:16), and close the salutation of a business letter (Dear Senator Keaton:). But there are other uses for the colon that writers sometimes don't quite learn that can add an extra degree of flexibility to sentence structure.

The colon can introduce into a sentence certain kinds of material, such as a list, a quotation, or a restatement or description of material mentioned earlier in the paper.

List: The committee's research proposal promised to do three things: (1) establish the extent of the problem; (2) examine several possible solutions; and (3) estimate the cost of each solution.

Quotation: In his speech, the mayor challenged us with these words: "How will your council's work make a difference in the life of our city?"

Restatement or description: Ahead of us, according to the senator's chief of staff, lay the biggest job of all: convincing our constituents of the plan's benefits.

2.2.4 Commas

The comma is perhaps the most troublesome of all punctuation marks, no doubt because its use is governed by so many variables, such as sentence length, rhetorical emphasis, and changing notions of style. Following are the most common problems.

Comma splices. Joining two complete sentences by only a comma makes a comma splice. Examine the following examples of comma splices:

An impeachment is merely an indictment of a government official, actual removal usually requires a vote by a legislative body.

An unemployed worker who has been effectively retrained is no longer an economic problem for the community, he has become an asset.

It might be possible for the city to assess fees on the sale of real estate, however, such a move would be criticized by the community of real estate developers.

In each of these passages, two complete sentences (also called independent clauses) have been "spliced" together by a comma. When a comma splice is taken out of context, it becomes easy to see what is wrong: The break between the two sentences is inadequate. Simply reading the draft through to try to "hear" the comma splices may not work, however, since the rhetorical features of your prose—its "movement"—may make it hard to detect this kind of sentence error.

There is one foolproof way to check your paper for comma splices. Locate the commas in your draft and then read carefully the structures on both sides of each comma to determine whether you have spliced together two complete sentences. If you find a complete sentence on both sides of a comma, and if the sentence following the comma does not begin with a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet*), then you have found a comma splice.

There are five commonly used ways to correct comma splices:

1. Place a period between the two independent clauses

   Splice: A physician receives many benefits from his or her affiliation with clients, there are liabilities as well.

   Correction: A physician receives many benefits from his or her affiliation with clients. There are liabilities as well.

2. Place a comma and a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet*) between the sentences:

   Splice: The chairperson's speech described the major differences of opinion over the departmental situation, it also suggested a possible course of action.

   Correction: The chairperson's speech described the major differences of opinion over the departmental situation, and it also suggested a possible course of action.

3. Place a semicolon between the independent clauses:

   Splice: Some people believe that the federal government should play a large role in establishing a housing policy for the homeless, many others disagree.

   Correction: Some people believe that the federal government should play a large role in establishing a housing policy for the homeless; many others disagree.

4. Rewrite the two clauses of the comma splice as one independent clause:

   Splice: Television programs play some part in the development of delinquent attitudes, however they were not found to be the deciding factor in determining the behavior of juvenile delinquents.

   Correction: Television programs were found to play a minor but not a decisive role in determining the delinquent behavior of juveniles.

5. Change one of the two independent clauses into a dependent clause by beginning it with a subordinating word. A subordinating word introducing a clause prevents the clause from being able to stand on its own as a complete sentence. Words that can be used as subordinators include *although, after, as, because, before, if, though, unless, when, which,* and *where.*

   Splice: The student meeting was held last Tuesday, there was a poor turnout.

   Correction: When the student meeting was held last Tuesday, there was a poor turnout.

Comma missing in a compound sentence. A compound sentence is comprised of two or more independent clauses—two complete sentences. When these two clauses are joined by a coordinating conjunction, the conjunction should be preceded by a comma. (In the previous section, the second solution for fixing a comma splice calls for the writer to transform the splice into this sort of compound sentence.) The error is that writers sometimes fail to place the comma before the conjunction. Remember, the comma is there to signal the reader that another independent clause follows the coordinating conjunction. In other words, the comma is like a road sign, telling a driver what sort of road she is

about to encounter. If the comma is missing, the reader does not expect to find the second half of a compound sentence and may be distracted from the text. As the following examples indicate, the missing comma is especially a problem in longer sentences or in sentences in which other coordinating conjunctions appear:

> *Missing comma:* The senator promised to visit the hospital and investigate the problem and then he called the press conference to a close.
>
> *With the comma added:* The senator promised to visit the hospital and investigate the problem, and then he called the press conference to a close.
>
> *Missing comma:* The water board can neither make policy nor enforce it nor can its members serve on auxiliary water committees.
>
> *With the comma added:* The water board can neither make policy nor enforce it, nor can its members serve on auxiliary water committees.

Notice how the comma sorts out the two main parts of the compound sentence, eliminating confusion. However, an exception to the rule must be noted. In shorter sentences, the comma may not be necessary to make the meaning clear:

> The mayor phoned and we thanked him for his support.

Placing a comma between the independent clauses after the conjunction is never wrong, however. If you are the least bit unsure of your audience's notions about what makes for "proper" grammar, it is a good idea to take the conservative approach and use the comma:

> The mayor phoned, and we thanked him for his support.

Missing comma or commas with a nonrestrictive element. A nonrestrictive element is part of a sentence—a word, phrase, or clause—that adds information about another element in the sentence without restricting or limiting the meaning of that element. In other words, a nonrestrictive element simply says something about some other part of the sentence without changing radically our understanding of it. Although the information it carries may be useful, we do not have to have the nonrestrictive element for the sentence to make sense. To signal the nonessential nature of the element, we set it off from the rest of the sentence with commas.

Failure to indicate the nonrestrictive nature of an element by using commas can cause confusion. For example, see how the presence or absence of commas affects our understanding of the following sentence:

> The judge was talking with the police officer, who won the outstanding service award last year.
>
> The judge was talking with the police officer who won the outstanding service award last year.

Can you see that the comma changes the meaning of the sentence? In the first version of the sentence, the comma makes the information that follows it incidental: The judge was talking with the police officer, who happens to have won the service award last year. In the second version of the sentence, the information following the term *police officer* is important to the sense of the sentence; it tells us, specifically, which police officer—presumably there are more than one—the judge was addressing. The lack of a comma has transformed the material following the term *police officer* into a restrictive element—meaning one necessary to our understanding of the sentence. Be sure that in your paper you make a clear distinction between nonrestrictive and restrictive elements by setting off the nonrestrictive elements with commas.

Missing comma in a series. A series is any two or more items of a similar nature that appear consecutively in a sentence. The items may be individual words, phrases, or clauses. One of the rules that we all learned a long time ago is that the items in a series of three or more items are separated by commas. In the following examples the series items are in italics:

> *The senator, the mayor,* and *the police chief* all attended the ceremony.
>
> Because of the new zoning regulations, *all trailer parks must be moved out of the neighborhood, all small businesses must apply for recertification and tax status,* and *the two local churches must repave their parking lots.*

The final comma, the one before the *and,* is sometimes left out, especially in newspaper writing. This practice, however, can make for confusion, especially in longer, complicated sentences like the second example. Here is the way the sentence would read without the final comma:

> Because of the new zoning regulations, all trailer parks must be moved out of the neighborhood, all small businesses must apply for recertification and tax status and the two local churches must repave their parking lots.

Notice how the second *and,* which is not set off from the sequence in front of it, seems at first to be an extension of the second clause in the series instead of the beginning of the third. This is the sort of ambiguous structure that can cause a reader to backtrack and lose concentration.

To avoid the possibility of causing this sort of confusion, it is a good idea always to include that final comma. And remember that if you do decide to include it, be consistent; make sure it appears in every series in your paper.

2.2.5 Misplaced Modifiers

A modifier is a word or group of words used to describe—to "modify" our understanding of—another word in the sentence. A misplaced modifier is one that appears either at the beginning or ending of a sentence and seems to describe some word other than the one the writer obviously intended. The modifier is

disconnected from its intended meaning. Because the writer knows what she wishes to say, it is often hard for her to spot a misplaced modifier. But other readers find them, and the result can be disastrous for the sentence.

> *Incorrect:* Flying low over Washington, the White House was seen.
>
> *Correct:* Flying low over Washington, we saw the White House.
>
> *Incorrect:* Worried about the cost of the program, sections of the bill were trimmed in committee.
>
> *Correct:* Worried about the cost of the program, the committee trimmed sections of the bill.
>
> *Correct:* The committee trimmed sections of the bill because they were worried about the cost of the program.
>
> *Incorrect:* To lobby for prison reform, a lot of effort went into the TV ads.
>
> *Correct:* The lobby group put a lot of effort into the TV ads advocating prison reform.
>
> *Incorrect:* Stunned, the television network broadcast the defeated senator's concession speech.
>
> *Correct:* The television network broadcast the stunned senator's concession speech.

You will note that in the first two incorrect sentences, the confusion is largely due to the use of passive-voice verbs: the White House was seen, sections of the bill were trimmed. Often, though not always, the cause of a misplaced modifier is the fact that the actor in the sentence—*we* in the first example, *the committee* in the second—is either distanced from the modifier or obliterated by the passive-voice verb. It is a good idea to avoid passive voice unless you have a specific reason for using it.

One way to check for misplaced modifiers is to examine all modifiers at the beginnings or endings of your sentences. Look especially for *to be* phrases (to lobby) or for words ending in *–ing* or *–ed* at the start of the modifier. Then check to see whether the word being modified is in plain sight and close enough to the phrase to be properly connected.

2.2.6 Parallelism

Series of two or more words, phrases, or clauses within a sentence should be structured in the same grammatical way. Parallel structures can add power and balance to your writing by creating a strong rhetorical rhythm. Here is a famous example of parallelism from the U.S. Constitution. (The capitalization, preserved from the original document, follows eighteenth-century custom. Parallel structures have been italicized.)

> **Preamble to the Constitution**
>
> We the People of the United States, in Order to *form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure Domestic Tranquillity, provide for the Common Defense,*

promote the general Welfare, and *secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity,* do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Note that there are actually two series in this sentence, the first composed of several phrases that each complete the infinitive phrase beginning with the word *to* (*to form,* [to] *Establish,* [to] *insure*), the second consisting of two verbs (*do ordain* and *establish*). These parallel series appeal to our love of balance and pattern, and give an authoritative tone to the sentence. We feel the writer has thought long and carefully about the subject, and has taken firm control of it.

We find a special satisfaction in balanced structures and so are more likely to remember ideas phrased in parallelisms than in less highly ordered language. For this reason—as well as for the sense of authority and control that they suggest—parallel structures are common in well-written speeches. Consider the following examples:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.
>
> —Declaration of Independence

> But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.
>
> —Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address

> Let us never negotiate out of fear. But never let us fear to negotiate. . . . Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.
>
> —John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address

If the parallelism of a passage is not carefully maintained, the writing can seem sloppy and out of balance. To check for parallelism, scan your writing for any series of two or more items in a sentence. These items should be parallel in structure. In other words, if one item depends on an *-ing* construction, as in the second example following, so should its partners. Any lists in your paper should consist of items that are parallel in structure. Note the following examples of incorrect and correct constructions:

Incorrect: The mayor promises not only to reform the police department, but also the giving of raises to all city employees.

Correct: The mayor promises not only to reform the police department, but also to give raises to all city employees. [Connective structures such as *not only . . . but also* introduce elements that should be parallel.]

Incorrect: The cost of doing nothing is greater than the cost to renovate the apartment block.

Correct: The cost of doing nothing is greater than the cost of renovating the apartment block.

Incorrect: Here are the items on the committee's agenda: (1) to discuss the new property tax; (2) to revise the wording of the city charter; and (3) a vote on the city manager's request for an assistant.

Correct: Here are the items on the committee's agenda: (1) to discuss the new property tax; (2) to revise the wording of the city charter; and (3) to vote on the city manager's request for an assistant.

2.2.7 *Fused (Run-On) Sentences*

A fused sentence is one in which two or more independent clauses (passages that can stand as complete sentences) have been joined together without the aid of any suitable connecting word, phrase, or punctuation; the sentences run together. As you can see, there are several ways to correct a fused sentence:

Incorrect: The council members were exhausted they had debated for two hours.

Correct: The council members were exhausted. They had debated for two hours. [The linked independent clauses have been separated into two sentences.]

Correct: The council members were exhausted; they had debated for two hours. [A semicolon marks the break between the two clauses.]

Correct: The council members were exhausted, having debated for two hours. [The second independent clause has been rephrased as a dependent clause.]

Incorrect: Our policy analysis impressed the committee it also convinced them to reconsider their action.

Correct: Our policy analysis impressed the committee by convincing them to reconsider their action. [The second clause has been rephrased as part of the first clause.]

Correct: Our policy analysis impressed the committee, and it also convinced them to reconsider their action. [The two clauses have been separated by a comma and a coordinating word.]

Although a fused sentence is easily noticeable to the reader, it can be maddeningly difficult for the writer to catch in proofreading. Unpracticed writers tend to read through the fused spots, sometimes supplying the break that is usually heard when sentences are spoken. To check for fused sentences, read the independent clauses in your paper carefully, making sure that there are adequate breaks among all of them.

2.2.8 *Pronoun Errors*

The difference between *its* and *it's.* Do not make the mistake of trying to form the possessive of it in the same way that you form the possessive of most nouns. The pronoun *it* shows possession by simply adding an *s:*

The prosecuting attorney argued the case on its merits.

The word *it's* is a contraction, meaning "it is":

It's the most expensive program ever launched by the prison.

What makes the *its/it's* rule so confusing is that most nouns form the singular possessive by adding an apostrophe and an *s:* The jury's verdict startled the crowd. When proofreading, any time you come to the word *it's,* substitute the phrase *it is* while you read. If the phrase makes sense, you have used the correct form. Consider the following examples:

If you have used the word *it's:*

The newspaper article was misleading in it's analysis of the election.

Then read *it's* as *it is:*

The newspaper article was misleading in it is analysis of the election.

If the phrase makes no sense, substitute *its* for *it's:*

The newspaper article was misleading in its analysis of the election.

Vague pronoun reference. Pronouns are words that stand in place of nouns or other pronouns that have already been mentioned in your writing. The most common pronouns include *he, she, it, they, them, those, which,* and *who.* You must make sure that each pronoun reference is clear; in other words, that there is no confusion about the reference. Examine the following clear pronoun references:

The mayor said that he would support our bill if the city council would also back it.

The piece of legislation that drew the most criticism was the bill concerning housing for the poor.

The word that is replaced by the pronoun is called its *antecedent.* To check the accuracy of your pronoun references, ask yourself this question: To what does the pronoun refer? Then answer the question carefully, making sure that there is not more than one possible antecedent. Consider the following sentence:

Several special interest groups decided to defeat the new health care bill. This became the turning point of the government's reform campaign.

To what does the word *this* refer? The immediate answer seems to be the word *bill* at the end of the previous sentence. It is more likely the writer was referring to the attempt of the special interest groups to defeat the bill, but there is no word in the first sentence that refers specifically to this action. The reference is unclear. One way to clarify the reference is to change the beginning of the second sentence:

Several special interest groups decided to defeat the new health care bill. Their attack on the bill became the turning point of the government's reform campaign.

Here is another example:

When John F. Kennedy appointed his brother Robert to the position of U.S. Attorney General, he had little idea how widespread the corruption in the Teamsters Union was.

To whom does the word *he* refer? It is unclear whether the writer is referring to John or to Robert Kennedy. One way to clarify the reference is simply to repeat the antecedent instead of using a pronoun:

When President John F. Kennedy appointed his brother Robert to the position of U.S. Attorney General, Robert had little idea how widespread the corruption in the Teamsters Union was.

Pronoun agreement. Remember that a pronoun must agree in gender and in number with its antecedent. This rule is generally easy for us to remember. Study the following examples of pronoun agreement:

Mayor Smith said that he appreciated our club's support in the election.

One reporter asked the senator what she would do if the President offered her a cabinet post.

Having listened to our case, the judge decided to rule on it within the week.

Engineers working on the housing project said they were pleased with the renovation so far.

The following words, however, can become troublesome antecedents. They may look like plural pronouns but are actually singular:

everybody	nobody	everyone
no one	somebody	each
someone	either	anyone

A pronoun referring to one of these words in a sentence must be singular, too. Pronoun agreement errors appear in the following examples:

Incorrect: Each of the women in the support group brought their children.

Correct: Each of the women in the support group brought her children.

Incorrect: Has everybody received their ballot?

Correct: Has everybody received his or her ballot? [The two gender-specific pronouns are used to avoid sexist language.]

Correct: Have all the delegates received their ballots? [The singular antecedent has been changed to a plural one.]

Shift in person. It is important to avoid shifting among first person (*I, we*), second person (*you*), and third person (*she, he, it, one, they*) unnecessarily. Such shifts can cause confusion:

> *Incorrect:* Most people [third person] who seek a job find that if you [second person] tell the truth during your interviews, you will gain the interviewers' respect.
>
> *Correct:* Most people who seek a job find that if they tell the truth during their interviews, they will win the interviewers' respect.

2.2.9 Quotation Marks

It can be difficult to remember when to use quotation marks and where they go in relation to other marks of punctuation. When faced with a gap in their knowledge of the rules, unpracticed writers often try to rely on logic rather than referring to a rule book. But the rules governing quotation marks do not always seem to us to rely on logic. The only way to make sure of your use of quotation marks is to memorize the rules. There are not many.

When to use quotation marks. Use quotation marks to enclose direct quotations, if they are four typed lines or less:

> In his farewell address to the American people, George Washington warned, "The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations, is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible." (U.S. Senate 1991)

Longer quotes are indented left and right and single-spaced—without quotation marks:

> Lincoln explained his motive for continuing the Civil War clearly in his response to Horace Greeley's open letter:
>
>> I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution. The sooner the National authority can be restored, the nearer the Union will be the Union as it was. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time save Slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time destroy Slavery, I do not agree with them. (Lincoln 1862)

Use single quotation marks to set off quotations within quotations:

> "I intend," said the professor, "to use in my lecture a line from Frost's poem, 'The Road Not Taken.'"

Note that when the interior quote occurs at the end of the sentence, both single and double quotation marks are placed outside the period. Use quotation marks to set off the following kinds of titles:

- The title of a short poem: "The Second Coming," by William Butler Yeats [But note that the title of a long poem published as a book does not appear in quotation marks; instead, it is italicized as a book would be: *The Dark Sister,* by Winfield Townley Scott]
- The title of a short story
- The title of an article or essay
- The title of a song
- An episode of a television or radio show

Use quotation marks to set off words or phrases used in special ways:

> *To convey irony:* The so-called "liberal" administration has done nothing but cater to big business.
>
> *To set off a technical term:* To have "charisma," Weber would argue, is to possess special powers. Many believe that John F. Kennedy had great charisma. [Note that once the term is defined, it is not placed in quotation marks again.]

Placement of quotation marks in relation to other punctuation. Always place commas and periods inside closing quotation marks:

> "My fellow Americans," said the President, "there are tough times ahead of us."

Place colons and semicolons outside closing quotation marks:

> In his speech on voting, the sociologist warned against "an encroaching indolence"; he was referring to the middle class.
>
> There are several victims of the government's campaign to "Turn Back the Clock": the homeless, the elderly, and the mentally impaired.

Place question marks, exclamation points, and dashes inside or outside closing quotation marks, depending on context. If the punctuation is part of the quotation, it goes inside the quotation mark:

> "When will the tenure committee make up its mind?" asked the dean.
>
> The demonstrators shouted, "Free the hostages!" and "No more slavery!"

If the punctuation is not part of the quotation, it goes outside the quotation mark:

> Which president said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself"?

Note that although the quote was a complete sentence, you do not place a period after it. There can only be one mark of "terminal" punctuation (punctuation that ends a sentence).

2.2.10 Semicolons

The semicolon is a little-used punctuation mark that is worth incorporating into your writing strategy because of its many potential applications. A semicolon can be used to correct a comma splice:

> *Incorrect:* The union representatives left the meeting in good spirits, their demands were met.
>
> *Correct:* The union representatives left the meeting in good spirits; their demands were met.
>
> *Incorrect:* Several guests at the fund-raiser had lost their invitations, however, we were able to seat them, anyway.
>
> *Correct:* Several guests at the fund-raiser had lost their invitations; however, we were able to seat them, anyway.

It is important to remember that conjunctive adverbs like *however, therefore,* and *thus* are not coordinating words (such as *and, but, or, for, so,* and *yet*) and cannot be used with a comma to link independent clauses. If the second independent clause begins with *however,* it must be preceded by either a period or a semicolon. As you can see from the second example, connecting the two independent clauses with a semicolon instead of a period preserves the suggestion that there is a strong relationship between the clauses.

Semicolons can separate items in a series. Usually commas separate items in a series:

> We ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner in the hotel.

But when the series items themselves contain commas, the items may be separated from one another with semicolons.

> The newspaper account of the rally stressed the march, which drew the biggest crowd; the mayor's speech, which drew tremendous applause; and the party afterwards in the park.

Avoid misusing semicolons. Do not use a semicolon to separate an independent clause from a dependent clause:

> *Incorrect:* Students from the college volunteered to answer phones during the pledge drive; which was set up to generate money for the new arts center.
>
> *Correct:* Students from the college volunteered to answer phones during the pledge drive, which was set up to generate money for the new arts center.

Although you can use a semicolon to separate two independent clauses, you should use a comma to separate an independent clause from a dependent clause. Do not overuse semicolons. Useful though semicolons are, if too many of them appear in your writing, they can distract your reader's attention. Avoid monotony by using semicolons sparingly.

2.2.11 Sentence Fragments

A fragment is a part of a sentence that is punctuated and capitalized as if it were an entire sentence. It is an especially disruptive kind of error, because it obscures the kinds of connections that the words of a sentence must make in order to complete the reader's understanding. Students sometimes write fragments because they are concerned that a particular sentence is growing too long and needs to be shortened. Remember that cutting the length of a sentence merely by adding a period somewhere along the way often creates a fragment. When checking your writing for fragments, it is essential that you read each sentence carefully to determine (1) whether there is a complete subject and a verb; and (2) whether there is a subordinating word preceding the subject and verb, making the construction a subordinate clause rather than a complete sentence.

Some fragments lack a verb:

> *Incorrect:* The chairperson of our committee, having received a letter from the mayor. [It may look as if there is a verb in this passage, but the word *having,* which can be used as a verb, is used here as a gerund introducing a participial phrase. Watch out for words that look like verbs but are used in another way.]
>
> *Correct:* The chairperson of our committee received a letter from the mayor.

Some fragments lack a subject:

> *Incorrect:* Our study shows that there is broad support for improvement in the health care system. And in the unemployment system.
>
> *Correct:* Our study shows that there is broad support for improvement in the health care system and in the unemployment system.

Some fragments are subordinate clauses:

> *Incorrect:* After the latest edition of the newspaper came out. [This clause has the two major components of a complete sentence: a subject (*edition*) and a verb (*came*). Indeed, if the first word (*After*) were deleted, the clause would be a complete sentence. But that first word is a subordinating word, which acts to prevent the following clause from standing on its own as a complete sentence. Watch out for this kind of construction. It is called a subordinate clause, and it is not a sentence.]
>
> *Correct:* After the latest edition of the newspaper came out, the mayor's press secretary was overwhelmed with phone calls. [A subordinate clause is connected in meaning to the independent clause either before or after it. A common method of revising a subordinate clause that has been punctuated as a complete sentence is to connect it to the complete sentence to which its meaning is most closely connected.]
>
> *Incorrect:* Several members of Congress asked for copies of the Vice President's position paper. Which called for reform of the Environmental Protection Agency. [The clause beginning after the first period is a subordinate clause written as if it were a complete sentence.]
>
> *Correct:* Several members of Congress asked for copies of the Vice President's position paper, which called for reform of the Environmental Protection Agency.

2.3 SPELLING

All of us have special spelling problems, words whose correct spelling we have not yet committed to memory. Most writers are not as bad at spelling as they believe themselves to be. Usually it is just a handful of words that the individual finds troubling. The most important thing to do when confronting your spelling problems is to be as sensitive as possible to those words with which you know you have trouble and keep a dictionary handy. No writer should be without a dictionary. There is no excuse for failing to look up a questionable spelling.

When using a computer to type your paper, take advantage of the "spell check" feature available with most word-processing software. It allows you to check those words listed in the program's dictionary. But do not rely entirely on your computer's spell checker. It will miss a variety of words that are properly spelled but are improperly used variants within a particular context. Notice that the mistakes in the following sentences would go unnoticed by a computer's spell checker:

> Wilbur wood rather dye than admit that he had been their. When he cited the bare behind the would pile, he thought,"Isle just lye hear until he goes buy."

Following are two lists of words that often give writers trouble. Read through the lists, looking for those words that tend to give you trouble.

2.3.1 Commonly Confused Words

The words in each pair listed below are often confused with each other. If you do not know the difference in a particular pair, consult your dictionary:

accept/except
advice/advise
affect/effect
aisle/isle
allusion/illusion
an/and
angel/angle
ascent/assent
bare/bear
brake/break
breath/breathe
buy/by
capital/capitol
choose/chose
cite/sight/site
complement/compliment
conscience/conscious
corps/corpse
council/counsel
dairy/diary
descent/dissent
desert/dessert
device/devise
die/dye
dominant/dominate
elicit/illicit
eminent/immanent/imminent
envelop/envelope
every day/everyday
fair/fare

formally/formerly
forth/fourth
hear/here
heard/herd
hole/whole
human/humane
its/it's
know/no
later/latter
lay/lie
lead/led
lessen/lesson
loose/lose
may be/maybe
miner/minor
moral/morale
of/off
passed/past
patience/patients
peace/piece
personal/personnel
plain/plane
precede/proceed
presence/presents
principal/principle
quiet/quite
rain/reign/rein
raise/raze
reality/realty
respectfully/respectively
reverend/reverent
right/rite/write
road/rode
scene/seen
sense/since
stationary/stationery
straight/strait
taught/taut
than/then
their/there/they're
threw/through
too/to/two
track/tract
waist/waste
waive/wave
weak/week
weather/whether
were/where
which/witch
whose/who's
your/you're

2.3.2 Commonly Misspelled Words

acceptable
accessible
accommodate
accompany
accustomed
acquire
against
a lot
annihilate
apparent
arguing/argument
authentic
before
begin/beginning
believe
bulletin
business
cannot
category
committee

condemn
courteous
definitely
dependent
desperate
develop
different
disappear
disappoint
easily
efficient
environment
equipped
exceed
exercise
existence
experience
fascinate
finally
foresee
forty
fulfill
gauge
guaranteed
guard
harass
hero/heroes
humorous
hurried/hurriedly
hypocrite
ideally
immediately
immense
incredible
innocuous
intercede
interrupt
irrelevant
irresistible
irritate
knowledge
license
likelihood
maintenance
manageable
meanness
mischievous
missile
necessary
nevertheless
no one
noticing/noticeable
nuisance
occasion/occasionally
occurred/occurrences
omit/omission
opinion
opponent
parallel
parole
peaceable
performance
pertain
practical
preparation
probably
process
professor
prominent
pronunciation
psychology
publicly
pursue/pursuing
questionnaire
realize
received/receipt
recession
recommend

referring
religious
remembrance
reminisce
repetition
representative
rhythm
ridiculous
roommate
satellite
scarcity
scenery
science
secede/secession
secretary
senseless
separate
sergeant
shining
significant
sincerely
skiing
stubbornness
studying
succeed/success/successfully
susceptible
suspicious
technical
temporary
tendency
therefore
tragedy
truly
tyranny
unanimous
unconscious
undoubtedly
until
vacuum
valuable
various
vegetable
visible
without
women
writing