

Common Grammar Pitfalls for Writers

Respect your tools and your craft. These kinds of errors signal to your readers – including editors and other gatekeepers – that you don't really know what you're doing.

You should understand the following, and the problems they can cause:

Sentence structure (A writer needs to know what a sentence is!)

- ♦ run-on sentence (e.g. comma splice) vs. sentence fragment
- ♦ dependent vs. independent clauses

Homonyms and other easily confused terms

- ♦ their vs. there vs. they're, your vs. you're, then vs. than, affect vs. effect
- ♦ that vs. which, who vs. whom

Possessives and contractions

- ♦ Jays' vs. James's vs. James'
- ♦ its vs. it's

Punctuation

- ♦ comma vs. semi-colon vs. colon
- ♦ parentheses vs. dash vs. hyphen
- ♦ punctuation for dialogue

Pronouns with unclear referents, and dangling modifiers

- ♦ e.g. "Jane told Sally that she was taking it too seriously."
- ♦ e.g. "When it's their turn to roll, the dice will be given to the player."

Faulty parallelism

- ♦ "I like to read, write and editing" and "Don't be intimidated and afraid of the grammar terminology on this page" are e.g. of errors, while "It was both a long wedding and very beautiful" is inelegant, at the very least.
- ♦ A real-life example, published in the Perth Courier:
"Modern agricultural practices such as pesticide use, habitat loss and climate change pose a serious threat to biodiversity."

Grey areas, and prescriptivist vs. descriptivist grammar rules

- ♦ comma use, hyphenating compound words
- ♦ split infinitives, and ending a sentence with a preposition
- ♦ 'they' as a generic singular genderless pronoun
- ♦ "begging the question" – traditional definition vs. current usage

Write Right: How to Avoid Common Grammar Pitfalls

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