

Grammar and Punctuation: Guidelines and Common Mistakes

Possessives

When you are referring to something that belongs to someone, whether it is a physical item like a book or something abstract like an idea, here is what it looks like:

Jason's book (Not Jason book or Jasons book)

Lisa's thoughts (Not Lisa thoughts or Lisas thoughts)

In academic writing you will usually use the author's last name when you refer to her or her work:

Moltmann's theology (Not Moltmann theology or Moltmanns theology)

Johnson's argument (Not Johnson argument or Johnsons argument)

When referring to something that belongs to a group of people and ends in an "s," the apostrophe goes after the "s."

The Israelites' exodus out of Egypt represented a new beginning.

When making a singular noun that already ends in an "s" possessive, you can add an apostrophe "s" or simply add an apostrophe.

Jesus' words or Jesus's words

Commas

Indicate a list

Jones uses analogies, symbolism, and irony to make her point. (can omit the last comma)

She is a capable, brilliant, special human.

Set apart information

Jones, who graduated in 2013, now works at the School of Divinity.

Go after introductory bits (words or phrases)

Generally, God is good. In fact, God is good. Despite what Jones writes, God is good.

Join sentences together when using certain words. Always place a comma before FANBOYS (the words: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) that join two independent clauses (there must be a subject, verb, and complete thought in each clause).

Jones went to the library to find more research material, but there were no additional helpful sources.

Jones was frustrated at the lack of materials, so she made an appointment with the librarian.

If you do not have two independent clauses, then you do not need to insert a comma.

Jones got bored and napped at Starbucks.

Words like however, therefore, moreover, nevertheless, etc. require different punctuation when used as conjunctive adverbs. If you use one of these transition words and have a complete thought on both sides of it, you need a semicolon before that adverb and a comma after it. Alternatively, you can use a period and make two sentences. Either way, you will use a comma after the conjunctive adverb in the second complete thought.

Jones says she likes doing research. However, she always quits to get coffee.

Jones says she likes doing research; however, she always quits to get coffee.

(Not: Jones says she likes doing research, however, she always quits to get coffee. Not: Jones says she likes doing research, however she always quits to get coffee.)

If you do not have a complete thought on either side of these transitional adverbs, then you use commas before and after the adverb.

Jones likes doing research, however, not all the time.

I believe, moreover, that Jones prefers doing research over napping.

Colons

Can follow independent clauses and be used to announce, introduce or draw attention to a list, noun, noun phrase, a quotation, or an example/explanation.

The research topics that Jones prefers include: theology, Christology, theodicy, and the trinity.

Jones believes that most students do not know the best part of divinity school: the free food.

Are also used to express time, in titles and subtitles, and in Biblical usage, subtitles.

2:30 pm or Matthew 6:17

Semicolons

Semicolons are used when you are joining two sentences that can each stand alone. They suggest a close relationship between the two.

Jones examines several parables from the Gospel of Luke; her analysis yields some startling results.

Semicolons can be used in a list of phrases that already contains commas.

Jones bought shiny, red apples; small, sweet grapes; and firm, green pears.

Punctuation with quotation marks

The punctuation mark typically goes inside the quotation marks. Usually there is a comma after the verb introducing the quotation. The first word in the quotation is typically capitalized, except when it is integrated into the syntax of the sentence.

Johnson writes, "The symbol of God functions."

While "the symbol of God functions," we should not assume we know how these functions manifest.

If you are embedding the quotation into a sentence, you do not typically have a comma before the quotation.

Johnson argues that "the symbol of God functions," while Jones argues it does not.

Quotations within quotations will be surrounded by single quotation marks.

Jones writes, "While Johnson argues that 'the symbol of God functions,' in reality the symbol of God means nothing."

Even if you are only quoting part of a sentence, there should be no ellipses at the beginning or end of a quotation.

Jones writes, "My love for the library is intense." Not: Jones writes, "...my love for the library is intense...."

Dashes

Hyphens: short dash, between connected words (ex. well-intentioned) or in words spelled that way (ex. e-mail)

Dashes: Set off material for emphasis.

Single dash at beginning or end

After 7 years, Jones returned to her hometown—Winston-Salem.

Two dashes in the middle of a sentence can help if commas add confusion.

Even the simplest tasks—washing, dressing, and going to work—were nearly impossible after Jones returned home.

There, their, they're

There: a place

If you go there, you should bring books with you.

Their: something that belongs to several people

Please leave their books alone. Or: It was their decision to leave so early.

They're: when you want to combine "they" and "are"

If you are looking for Priscilla and Aquila, they're not here.

Apart vs a part

Use "apart" (one word) when you want to describe something that is separate from something else.

Jones lived apart from her family for seven years.

Use "a part" (two words) when you are describing something that is one part of something else.

Her decision to leave home was a part of her larger plan to meet new people.

To, too, two

To: a connection word with lots of uses

If you want to meet me at the library, we can schedule a time to do that.

Please go to the library and pick up Priscilla and Aquila.

Too: means also or a lot

That book is too wordy.
Can we please come too?

Two: the number 2

The author spends two paragraphs defining the term soteriology.

Gender inclusive language

See WFUSD's statement on Hospitality and Language.

Subject-Verb Agreement

The subject and verb of a sentence should agree in number; if the subject is singular, the verb needs to be singular. Likewise, if the subject is plural, the verb needs to be plural.

Tips for ensuring correct subject-verb agreement:

A subject will come before a phrase beginning with "of."

Incorrect: A basket of apples are on the table.

Correct: A basket of apples is on the table. (The subject comes before "of" here, so even though "apples" is plural the verb is singular because of the singular "basket.")

Two singular subjects connected by "or," "either/or," "nor," "neither/nor" take a singular verb.

Jones or Copeland is eating an apple. Either Jones or Copeland is eating an apple.

The verb in an "or," "either/or," "neither/nor" sentence agrees with the noun or pronoun closest to it.

Neither the apples nor the book goes on that shelf.

Neither the book nor the apples go on that shelf.

As a general rule, use a plural verb with two subjects connected by "and."

Jones and Copeland love apples.

Sometimes, however, phrases connected by and are singular.

The bed and breakfast was open. Breaking and entering is a crime.

Sometimes the subject is separated from the verb by words or phrases beginning with "along with," "as well as," "not," "besides," etc. These words and phrases are not part of the subject. Ignore them and use the appropriate verb with the subject (rather than the nouns or pronouns in the phrase).

Jones, along with her apples, is expected shortly. The Old Testament, not including the Apocrypha, contains 39 books.

Parentheses are not part of the subject.

Jones (and her colleagues) loves apples.

In sentences beginning with "here" or "there," the subject follows the verb.

There are four apples in the basket. There is one apple in the basket.

Use a singular verb with distances, units of time, sums of money, etc. when they make up one unit.

Ten dollars is a high price to pay for apples. Two hours is a long time to wait for apples.

With words that indicate portions (a lot, a majority, some, all), the noun after of determines if the verb is singular or plural.

A lot of apples have disappeared.

A third of the pie is gone.

A majority of apples are red.

With collective nouns such as “group,” “jury,” “family,” “audience,” and “population,” the verb might be singular or plural, depending on the writer’s intent.

A third of the student population love the apples or loves the apples.

All of my family has arrived or have arrived.

The word “were” replaces “was” in sentences that express a wish or are contrary to fact.

If Jones were here, you’d be sorry.

I wish it were Friday.

She requested that he raise his hand.

The words “each,” “each one,” “either,” “neither,” “everyone,” “everybody,” “anybody,” “anyone,” “nobody,” “somebody,” “someone,” and “no one” are singular and require a singular verb.

Everyone loves Jones’ classes. Anybody knows that Jones is a good professor. No one makes me learn as much as Jones. Either professor is good.

Sentence Fragments

Each sentence must contain a subject, verb, and independent clause (a complete thought).

Subject: Jones did research at the library. (Not: Did research at the library.)

Verb: Jones is trying to do research. (Not: Jones trying to do research.)

Independent clause: Jones was tired of doing research, which is why she took a nap. Or Jones was tired of doing research. She took a nap. (Not: Jones was tired of doing research. Which is why she took a nap.)

Run-On Sentences

Run-on sentences string together multiple complete sentences without the appropriate punctuation.

Examples: Jones loves the library, she would go everyday if she could. Or: Jones loves the library she would go everyday if she could.

Corrected: Jones loves the library. She would go everyday if she could.

Example: Jones checked out a book on theodicy. And Christology.

Corrected: Jones checked out books on theodicy and Christology.

Beginning a sentence with a coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so)

While we often are taught that beginning a sentence with one of these words is incorrect, most modern style guides agree that it is grammatically fine to do so.

Jones conducted research at the library. And she did it with gusto.

Jones conducted research at the library. But that was not all she did there.

You cannot, however, begin a sentence with a subordinating conjunction, such as because, although, if, or when.

Jones went took a nap because she was tired. Not: Jones took a nap. Because she was tired.

Jones took a nap although she needed to work. Not: Jones took a nap. Although she needed to work.

A way to tell the difference between a subordinating and coordinating conjunction is this—a subordinating clause can go at the beginning of either of the clauses it connects while a coordinating clause goes between them.

Subordinating: Because Jones was tired, she took a nap.

Coordinating: Jones was tired, but she stayed awake. Here, it would not make sense to say:

But Jones was tired, she stayed awake.

Sources and Useful Resources

UNC Writing Center <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/>

Chicago Manual of Style https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/16/ch05/ch05_toc.html

Grammar Girl Quick and Dirty Tips <https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar>

Purdue Owl https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/index.html

Grammar Book <https://www.grammarbook.com/>