



Proofreading for Common Surface Errors: Spelling and Punctuation

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1. About

In most college courses, instructors expect that your writing will be free of surface errors, but you may be uncertain of the rules for spelling, punctuation, grammar, and word choice. The following rules and examples, taken primarily from *The St. Martin's Handbook*, 3rd ed., by Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors, may help you find and correct some of the most common surface errors in your writing. If you have questions about these rules, consult any good grammar book.

2. Spelling

Spelling errors are the most common surface errors as well as the most easily corrected. To correct spelling errors, use a spell-checker, regardless of your spelling skill, along with a dictionary to help you find the right alternative for a misspelled word. Remember that the spell-checker won't help with homonyms, words that sound alike but have different spellings and meanings. Some words that can cause trouble are listed below.

their	(possessive form of <i>they</i>)
there	(in that place)
they're	(contraction of <i>they are</i>)
accept	(a verb, meaning <i>to receive</i> or <i>to admit to a group</i>)
except	(usually a preposition, meaning <i>but</i> or <i>only</i>)
who's	(contraction of <i>who is</i> or <i>who has</i>)
whose	(possessive form of <i>who</i>)
its	(possessive form of <i>it</i>)
it's	(contraction of <i>it is</i> or <i>it has</i>)
your	(possessive form of <i>you</i>)
you're	(contraction of <i>you are</i>)
affect	(usually a verb, meaning <i>to influence</i>)
effect	(usually a noun, meaning <i>result</i>)
than	(used in comparison)
then	(refers to a time in the past)
were	(form of the verb <i>to be</i>)
we're	(contraction of <i>we are</i>)
where	(related to location or place)

2. Periods and commas go **inside** closing quotation marks; colons and semicolons go **outside** them.

- I would use one word to describe the duke in Browning's poem "My Last Duchess": arrogant.
- One of the Beatles' first popular songs was "Love Me Do"; it catapulted the band to stardom.

General Proofreading Suggestions

1. Familiarize yourself with the errors you commonly make by looking over writing that has already been marked. Make a list of your errors, and check your writing for each of them.
2. **Carefully** and **slowly** read your writing out loud. Often your ear will hear what your eye did not see.
3. Read your writing backwards, sentence by sentence, from the last sentence to the first sentence. This technique interrupts the logical flow of the prose and neutralizes any impression of correctness arising from your knowledge of what you meant to say.
4. Use your dictionary to check any words you're unsure about, and to check for correct prepositions, verb tenses, and irregular forms.
5. Commas, periods, and apostrophes are sometimes more complicated than the examples illustrated in this text. Consult a handbook for any other questions.

For free help at any stage of the writing process, contact us at the following address:

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weather (climatic conditions)
whether (conjunction, meaning *if*)

3. Punctuation

a. Commas

1. Use a comma to signal a pause between the *introductory element* of a sentence and the main part of the sentence.

- **Frankly**, the committee's decision baffled us.
- **Though I gave him detailed advice for revising**, his draft only became worse.

2. Use a comma when you join two independent sentences with a *conjunction* (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*).

- Meredith wore jeans to the hotel, **but** she changed before the wedding.

3. If the two clauses in your sentence are both short, however, you may be able to omit the comma before *and* or *or*. You may also be able to omit the comma after an introductory element if the element is short.

- She saw her chance and she took it.
- At the racetrack Henry lost nearly his entire paycheck.

4. Use a comma to signal the presence of a *nonrestrictive element*, that is, a word, phrase, or clause that gives additional information about the preceding part of the sentence, but which can be deleted without changing the basic meaning of the sentence. If the element is in the middle of the sentence, use a comma before and after the element.

- Marina, **who was the president of the club**, was the first to speak.
- Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony until 1898, **when it was ceded to the U.S.**

5. Do **not** use a comma with a restrictive element, that is, a word, phrase, or clause that is essential to the meaning of the word or phrase it modifies. A restrictive element cannot be deleted without changing the sentence's basic meaning.

Wrong: I'll return the sweater, **that I borrowed**, after I wear it tonight.

Right: I'll return the sweater **that I borrowed** after I wear it tonight.

Wrong: The people, **who vandalized the school**, were never caught.

Right: The people **who vandalized the school** were never caught.

6. Traditionally, commas separate all the items in a series (three or more words, phrases, or clauses that appear consecutively in a sentence). Some instructors don't require a comma before the *and* or *or* between the last two items. Check your teacher's preference, and be consistent in either using or omitting this last comma.

- Sharks eat **squid, shrimp, crabs, and fish**

b. Apostrophes

1. To show that one thing belongs to another, either an apostrophe and an *s* or an apostrophe alone is added to the word representing the thing that possesses the other. An apostrophe and an *s* are used for *singular nouns, indefinite pronouns* (*anybody, everyone, nobody, somebody*), and for *plural nouns* that do not end in *s*. When plural nouns end in *s* only the apostrophe is used.

- Overambitious parents can be harmful to a **child's** well-being.
- The accident was **nobody's** fault.
- Both **drivers'** cars were damaged in the accident.

2. The word *its*, spelled without an apostrophe, is the possessive form of *it*, meaning of it or belonging to it. The word *it's*, spelled with an apostrophe, is a contraction of *it is* or *it has*. Even though with nouns an apostrophe usually indicates a possessive form, the possessive in this case is the one without the apostrophe.

- The car is lying on **its** side in the ditch. **It's** a white 1986 Buick.

c. Periods

1. A *comma splice* occurs when two or more clauses that could each stand alone as a sentence are written with only a comma between them. To correct this error, **separate the clauses with a period or semicolon, connect the clauses with a word like *and, for, because, or although*, or combine them into one clause.**

Wrong: The ship was huge, its mast stood thirty feet high.

Right: The ship was huge; **its** mast stood thirty feet high.

Wrong: The ship was huge, **and its** mast stood thirty feet high.

Right: The mast of the huge ship stood thirty feet high.

2. *Fused sentences* are created when two or more groups of words that could each be written as an independent sentence are written without any punctuation between them. To eliminate a fused sentence, **divide the groups of words into separate sentences, or join them in a way that shows their relationship.**

Wrong: Our fiscal policy is not well defined it confuses many people.

Right: Our fiscal policy is not well defined. **It** confuses many people.

Wrong: Our fiscal policy is not well defined, **and it** confuses many people.

d. Quotation Marks

1. Use quotation marks to signal direct quotations, titles, definitions, and words used ironically.

- George Bush called for a "kinder, gentler" America.
- My dictionary defines isolation as "the quality or state of being alone."
- The "fun" of surgery begins before the operation even takes place.