

Glossary of Grammatical Terms and Errors

- *active voice*: The common name for syntactical structures in which subjects *do* things, rather than have things done to them, the active voice arises when a clause's object receives the action or effect of a verb, which is enacted by the subject. For example, "John ate cookies" is a sentence using the active voice, while "Cookies were eaten by John" uses the passive voice, which is weaker and less desirable.
- *adjective*: Adjectives modify nouns, further describing or defining them. For example, the simple noun "dog" can be clarified or illuminated more fully with the addition of adjectives such as "hairy," "large," "brown," or "friendly."
- *adverb*: Adverbs modify verbs, specifying particular ways in which actions are carried out. For example, the simple verb "ran" can be modified by adverbs such as "quickly," "fervently," and "sluggishly." While it is untrue that all adverbs conclude with the suffix "-ly," that portrayal does serve as a useful, reliable rule of thumb.
- *antecedent*: Morphologically, the word "antecedent" means "that which goes before," which describes perfectly what a grammatical antecedent is. Usually placed before modifiers such as pronouns, adverbs, and prepositional phrases, antecedents are the nouns to which pronouns, appositives, and the like refer to. In the sentence "The voters, all of whom were over forty years old, were told that they could not vote until noon," the noun "voters" serves as the antecedent of both the pronoun "they" and the appositive phrase describing the voters' age.
- *appositive*: An appositive is a word or phrase that interrupts the flow of a clause for the sake of further explanation; as such, they are always offset by commas. For example, in

the sentence “Christopher Newport, an English mariner, captained the *Susan Constant* in 1607,” the phrase “an English mariner” is an appositive, elaborating on the sentence’s subject.

- *capitalization error*: A capitalization error occurs either when letters that should be capitalized are not or when letters are capitalized that should not be, such as articles preceding proper nouns.
- *clauses, independent and dependent*: Clauses differ from phrases in that a clause requires both a subject and a predicate, i.e., a noun and a verb. Independent clauses can effectively stand alone as sentences, while dependent clauses are grammatically incomplete, commonly identifiable as sentence fragments. A common, though not exclusive, identifier of a dependent clause is the presence of a conjunction standing at either its beginning or its end, signaling that more information must be attached to the clause in order to make it independent.
- *comma splice*: The verb “splice” means “to cut,” and a comma splice does just that: it cuts a sentence unnecessarily. This term is sometimes overused, however, as in situations where two independent clauses are joined solely with a comma; this conjuncture is not technically a comma splice, since punctuation is required there, albeit a semicolon, rather than a comma.
- *compound adjective*: A compound adjective is a collection of multiple words functioning as one adjectival phrase to modify a noun. For example, the phrase “honey-roasted peanuts” contains the compound adjective “honey-roasted,” just as “soon-to-be-graduating students” contains its own adjectival phrase. Compound adjectives should always be hyphenated.

- *conjunction*: A conjunction is a linking word or phrase; its grammatical purpose is to conjoin phrases, clauses, and smaller parts of speech. The acronym “F.A.N.B.O.Y.S.” identifies the most common conjunctions, which are coordinating conjunctions: “for,” “and,” “nor,” “but,” “or,” “yet,” and “so.” Subordinating conjunctions, such as “unless” and “because,” strictly join clauses together and generally do not accompany commas.
- *contraction*: The word “contract” morphologically means “to drag or pull together,” i.e., to squeeze, and a contraction does just that: squeezes words into smaller wholes. For example, the words “can” and “not” can be contracted into “can’t,” and the decade of the 1980s can be contracted into the abbreviated “’80s.” The apostrophe in a contraction always replaces what is squeezed out, *per sé*.
- *correlative conjunction*: These conjunctions are neither singular words nor composite phrases, but rather pairs of words that are placed separately but function together in a sentence; stated simply, correlative conjunctions are actually two conjunctions in one. Examples include “either-or,” “not only-but also,” and “both-and.”
- *demonstrative pronoun*: A demonstrative pronoun demonstrates or points at particular nouns, e.g., “this,” “that,” “those,” and “these.” A demonstrative pronoun that does not point specifically at a noun in close proximity is technically a compositional error due to vagueness. See *unattributed pointing pronoun*.
- *dependent clause*: See *clauses, independent and dependent*.
- *diction*: One’s diction is his or her choice of words, and a diction error thus involves the misuse of a word, probably mistaken for something similar to it. Thus, a dictionary is named such because its purpose is to help a person to choose his or her words.

- *double negative*: A double negative, such as “not nobody,” functions as a positive statement, the two negative words effectively contradicting and canceling out each other. This error is more common in informal speech than in writing.
- *e.g.*: The acronym “e.g.” comes from the Latin phrase “*exempli gratia*”; it is used instead of the phrase “for example,” prior to offering a reader an actual example of whatever one’s topic is.
- *extra information*: This phrase is not a technical grammatical term, but an informal umbrella encompassing appositives, addresses, and other information unnecessary to the purpose and meaning of a clause. One may use the phrase “extra information” as a catch-all, explaining that any information which can be removed from a sentence without affecting its meaning or focus is technically extraneous and should thus be placed within commas. For example, in the sentence “New Jersey the Garden State is located adjacent to Pennsylvania,” the phrase “the Garden State” is an appositive and can be removed from the sentence without altering its essential meaning; as such, it should be placed within commas.
- *faulty comparison*: A faulty comparison occurs when a countable amount of something is compared in a sentence to some related, but innumerable noun, rather than to another equivalently countable amount. For example, the clause “Chicago has more restaurants than Milwaukee” contains a faulty comparison, as the number of restaurants in Chicago is here compared to the city of Milwaukee itself, rather than to the number of restaurants in Milwaukee; this faulty comparison can be remedied by the inclusion of the concluding verb “contains” or “has,” either of which functions as a *de facto* grammatical coda, establishing the contrast between the second number and the first. Faulty comparisons

never arise, however, when forms of the infinitive “to be” are omitted; it is the one verb that is always implied and need not be used outright.

- *grammar error*: The word “grammar” is commonly used, but somewhat misunderstood. Grammar can be thought of as an overall system of rules for language, syntactic and otherwise, or the study of those rules and linguistic relationships. In this way, grammar functions as an extremely large umbrella, under which fall the particularities of diction, syntax, punctuation, etymology, and the like. Errors labeled simply as grammatical errors do not fit into and cannot be identified by smaller subsets of particular errors.
- *i.e.*: The acronym “i.e.” comes from the Latin phrase “*id est*,” which means “that is.” This acronym is used correctly in place of the phrase “in other words,” prior to elaborating on or explaining further whatever one’s topic is.
- *independent clause*: See *clauses, independent and dependent*.
- *literary present tense*: Events in literature are essentially frozen in time. As a teacher sometimes explains it to students, even if they personally read *Romeo and Juliet* several years ago, were they to open the play once again to Act V, scene iii, Romeo would be right there on the page committing suicide in the present tense, before the reader’s eyes, just as he will be when someone else reads the play in ten, fifty, or five hundred years. As such, all events occurring in literature should always be referred to in the present tense. However, a tricky situation develops regarding events that occurred prior to the actual inception of a story on page 1, such as the death of Prince Hamlet’s father or the loss of Captain Ahab’s leg, which should be referred to in the historical past tense, having occurred before the “actual time” of the plot begins.

- *misplaced modifier*: A modifier is any word or phrase that elaborates upon, alters the meaning of, or... well, modifies another word or phrase. Adverbs, adjectives, prepositional phrases, and the like can all be classified as modifiers, which are misplaced when they modify parts of the sentence that they are not intended to describe. In the sentence “Hopefully, lunch will taste delicious,” the adverb “Hopefully” is a misplaced modifier, as it here describes the way in which the lunch tastes, rather than the imaginings of the sentence’s speaker, who hopes to eat well. Misplaced modifiers can be tricky to spot, but they nevertheless are common errors.
- *noun*: Famously, a noun is a “person, place, or thing,” as most students can tell you. Proper nouns are distinctive, often representing singularly identifiable things, e.g., “Bob Smith,” “Canada,” and “the White House.” Common nouns represent things that are not singularly distinctive, such as “grass” or “daughters.”
- *parallel construction, a.k.a. parallel structure*: Writers of lists must be careful that all elements, portions, items, or “things” in a list are formatted uniformly; it is always up to the writer just how those elements are set down, but they must *all* be nouns, *all* be verbs, *all* be adjectival phrases, *all* be gerunds, *all* be infinitives and start with the word “to,” *all* begin with prepositions, or whatever else the writer decides. Such uniform construction of lists is labeled “parallel construction,” and errors occur when structures of lists mix and match parts of speech or phrasal constructions.
- *passive voice*: Syntactically weaker than the preferred active voice, passive voice arises when the subject of a clause, rather than its object, receives the action or effect of a verb. Passive voice basically inverts common syntax, essentially turning the object of a clause written in the active voice into the subject of a clause using passive voice. For example,

the word “grades” is the object of the clause “Students earn grades,” whereas the same word is the subject of the passively voiced “Grades are earned by students.” Passive voice is weaker and thus less desirable than active voice because it is simply more effective syntactically to have subjects *do* things.

- *phrase*: A phrase is, quite simply, a collection of words. It does not need to include both a noun and a verb, as a clause does. “Big house,” “the Civil War,” “under the radar,” “under the bright stars shining,” and “grey-eyed Athena” are all phrases.
- *pointing pronoun*: See *demonstrative pronoun*.
- *possession error*: A possession error occurs with the omission or unnecessary addition either of letters or apostrophes when attempting to make nouns possessive. The phrase “my cars four tires,” for example, contains a possession error because it lacks a necessary apostrophe, while the phrase “Mr. Jones’ classroom” also errs by its omission of an “s” following the apostrophe.
- *preposition*: A preposition, simply stated, is a “relationship word,” purposefully describing the relationship between parts of a sentence. Most teachers have and explain to students a trick or two for identifying prepositions, e.g., whatever one can do or wherever one can be in relation to a fence, a door, a barn.... A favorite to use is the cloud because one can go *through* a cloud, be *under* a cloud, move *about* a cloud, come *from* a cloud, travel *within* a cloud, go *to* a cloud, etc. As I also explain to my own students, the rule that sentences should never end in prepositions is not some arbitrary invention of difficult English teachers, but rather a sensible necessity; after all, if a preposition is a relationship word, then ending a sentence with one leaves an incomplete relationship, akin to beginning or ending a sentence with a conjunction.

- *pronoun*: A pronoun's purpose is to replace or stand in for a noun. For example, one can say "it" rather than "the table," "her" rather than "Betsy Ross," and "they" rather than "the citizens of South Korea." Possessive pronouns, such as "his" and "my," have a self-explanatory classificatory name.
- *pronoun agreement*: Pronoun agreement errors occur when pronouns are used incorrectly relative to other portions of sentences. For example, the sentence "A good student always does their homework" misuses the plural possessive pronoun "their" alongside the singular "good student"; in this case, the gender-neutral and singular "his or her" should be substituted for "their" in order to make the subject and predicate agree grammatically.
- *punctuation error*: A punctuation error occurs when punctuation marks, from commas to colons to quotation marks, are misused. While several specific errors, e.g., comma splices, can technically be classified as punctuation errors, this term is a large and rather unspecific umbrella that should be avoided if more particular names for errors exist; in other words, choose to label a comma splice as such, rather than as a general punctuation error.
- *redundancy*: Redundancy is the stating or inclusion of things more times than necessary. The directive "quickly speed to the bank" and the phrase "close proximity" are redundant, as there surely is no other way to speed than quickly, so the adverb is unnecessary, and there is no proximity that is not, by definition, close.
- *seesaw conjunction*: I personally prefer this self-explanatory term, which draws its commonsense name from playground equipment; nevertheless, see *correlative conjunction*.

- *split infinitive*: An infinitive verb in any language is un-conjugated. It is neither past tense nor present, neither singular nor plural, neither masculine nor feminine... it is simply the purest form of a verb. In English, infinitives take the form of the word “to” plus the verbal component, e.g., “to swim,” “to languish,” “to require,” and “to be.” Though composed of two separate words, an infinitive is technically one complete verb, and it therefore should never be split down the middle by an adverb, hence a split infinitive.
- *subject-verb agreement*: Errors arise when subjects of sentences do not agree with their verbal predicates, often because of singular vs. plural issues. In the sentence “My father, along with my three brothers and I, are going fishing,” the singular subject “father” disagrees with the plural verb “are,” which should be singularized for correctness.
- *syntax*: Syntax is the placement of words in a particular order to create meaning. Syntax can be orthodox (e.g., “put your weapon away, for I mean you no harm”) or uncommon (e.g., “away your weapon put, for no harm I mean you”), but syntactical errors occur when accepted rules of common English syntax are violated, as with split infinitives.
- *unattributed pointing pronoun*: Demonstrative, a.k.a. pointing pronouns – “this,” “that,” “those,” and “these” – always need to point *at* particular nouns, either immediately following or in close proximity, for the sake of clarity. Such pronouns that do not precede nouns are vague, being unattributed to their objects, and thus qualify as grammatical errors.
- *unclear referent*: This error concerns pronouns that are ambiguous, i.e., when sentences include pronouns that either refer to nothing in particular or refer unclearly to one of several other parts of the sentence, such as nouns. For example, in the sentence “Joey

respected Michael Jordan because he loved basketball,” the pronoun “he” can legitimately be interpreted as referring either to Joey or to Michael Jordan; this referent is therefore unclear.

- *verb*: A verb is commonly understood and defined by students as an action, something that is done. Expansively, verbs are parts of speech that can express not only action, but also existence or occurrence, and their forms change when conjugated. “To be,” “sit,” “writes,” “had,” and “will swim” are examples of verbal forms.