

# **THE GRAMMAR ODYSSEY**

**A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY,  
SOME CRAZY PEOPLE DECIDED TO CREATE  
GRAMMAR RULES THAT MAKE WRITING SO MUCH  
MORE COMPLICATED THAN MOST PEOPLE ARE AWARE.  
HERE ARE THE BASIC RULES TO HELP THE GRAMMATICAL  
ASPECT OF YOUR WRITING IMPROVE.  
IF YOU COMPLETE THIS ODYSSEY, YOU WILL NO LONGER BE  
“MOST PEOPLE.”**

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# MISSION ONE: CONQUERING THE COMMA

**RULE #1:** When you have one independent clause to join with a second independent clause, you must use a coordinating conjunction and a comma—the comma always comes before the coordinating conjunction.

?) independent clause = has a subject + verb, makes sense on its own/could stand as its own sentence

?) coordinating conjunction = BOYSFAN = but, or, yet, so, for, and, nor

EX: I like to watch HGTV, but John really enjoys the History Channel.

EX: Gertie loves to sit in the window, so we always make sure to open the shades for her.

EX: Experimenting with new recipes is fun but can also be a challenge.

**RULE #2:** A comma is used after an introductory word, phrase, or clause.

?) common intro phrase = prepositional phrase

?) preposition = over, into, above, after, before, in, out, through, with, etc.

?) common intro clause = subordinate/dependent clause

?) subordinate/dependent clause = has a subject + verb, couldn't be its own sentence

EX: After you learn the rules of the comma, your writing will be stronger.

EX: As you finish your high school career, remember to enjoy the special senior year moments.

Tip: If you can switch the clauses and the sentence still makes sense, you need the comma.

**RULE #3:** A list that contains three or more items must have the commas between all elements in the list—including before the final “and” of the list (called the Oxford comma).

EX: We made the best of our vacation by relaxing, sight-seeing, and eating delicious cuisine.

**RULE #4:** If you want to include information in the sentence that could be removed without ruining the integrity of the sentence, use commas to set the information off as an appositive.

EX: My sister-in-law, a girl with four brothers and no sister, loves to hang out with me.

EX: Gertie, my cat, is very moody.

**RULE #5:** Use a comma between coordinate evaluative adjectives.

?) coordinate evaluative adjectives = two descriptors in a row that both evaluate the quality of one person, place, or thing

EX: We ate a delicious, well-balanced Thanksgiving dinner.

EX: Most students are hard-working, dedicated learners.

Tip: Take the comma out and put “and” in. Does the sentence still work? Yes? Well, you have yourself some coordinate evaluative adjectives. Put a comma between those—stat!

# MISSION TWO: SEMICOLON AND COLON CONFUSION NO MORE!

## SEMICOLONS

**RULE #1:** Use a semicolon when connecting two closely related independent clauses that are NOT joined by a BOYSFAN word.

EX: Customers can be very demanding and impatient; sales clerks must, therefore, be patient.

EX: College requires you to grow in a number of ways; appreciating this growth is the hard part.

**RULE #2:** Use a semicolon when connecting two closely related independent clauses with a conjunctive adverb or transitional phrase; remember to use the semicolon before and then a comma after the conjunctive adverb or transitional phrase.

?) conjunctive adverbs = accordingly, also, anyway, consequently, conversely, finally, furthermore, hence, however, meanwhile, nevertheless, next, similarly, subsequently, then, therefore, thus, and etc.

?) transitional phrases = after all, as a matter of fact, as a result, for example, for instance, in addition, in other words, on the contrary, on the other hand, and etc.

EX: A majority of the animals at the zoo were sleeping while we visited; consequently, we did not have a very fun experience.

**RULE #3:** Use a semicolon when separating items in a series that are already punctuated themselves.

EX: Anthropology encompasses several fields: archaeology, the study of ancient civilizations through artifacts; linguistics, the study of the structure and development of language, dialects, and idioms; and cultural sociology, the study of the way of life of various peoples, especially small, non-industrial societies.

## COLON

**RULE #1:** Use a colon after an independent clause to show a list, an appositive, or a quotation.

EX: Paramedics must carry a variety of emergency items in their rig: blankets, bandages, IV supplies, splints, pharmaceuticals, and oxygen.

EX: The character of Hamlet is known for the first lines of his soliloquy that contemplates matters of life and death: "To be, or not to be: that is the question . . ." (*Ham.* 3.1.52).

**RULE #2:** Use a colon between two independent clauses if and only if the second is reflective of or summarizes the first. This is usually used very sparingly for effect.

EX: Being in love is wonderful: it's like a breath of fresh air.

**RULE #3:** When using a colon, what precedes the colon must be an independent clause.

EX: The key, however, was what money represented: success, prestige, and power.

# MISSION THREE: POINTERS ON PRONOUNS

?) A pronoun substitutes for a noun, noun phrase, or a pronoun already mentioned: all of the words a pronoun can replace are called antecedents.

**RULE #1:** You must always make sure that the pronoun agrees in number with the antecedent.

WRONG: When a student is educated, they can go far in life.

CORRECT: When a student is educated, he or she can go far in life.

or, When students are educated, they can go far in life.

**RULE #2:** Beware of indefinite pronouns and agreement in number.

WRONG: Everyone must bring their books to the final.

CORRECT: Everyone must bring his or her book to the final.

BETTER: All of the students must bring their books to the final.

**RULE #3:** Make sure that the pronouns clearly reflect and are closely linked to the antecedent.

UNCLEAR: The friendly banter between Hamlet and Horatio eventually provoked him to declare that his world view was changed.

CLEAR: The friendly banter between Hamlet and Horatio eventually provoked Hamlet to declare that his world view was changed.

UNCLEAR: Brenda and Jane corresponded regularly when she was in London.

CLEAR: Brenda and Jane corresponded regularly when Brenda was in London.

BETTER: When Brenda was in London, she corresponded regularly with Jane.

**RULE #4:** Use clear references for “you,” “they,” “it,” “that,” and “which.”

UNCLEAR: In countries such as Canada, they pay for most medical procedures.

CLEAR: In countries such as Canada, the government pays for most medical procedures.

UNCLEAR: In the textbook it states that poverty is a problem in America.

CLEAR: The textbook states that poverty is a problem in America.

**Tip:** Like the terrifying clown demon from Stephen King's novel, avoid IT in all writing.

**RULE #5:** Use a possessive pronoun in front of a gerund.

?) gerund = an action word with an added –ing, which turns it into a noun

EX: I bake. (action verb)

Baking is a great hobby. (add the –ing, now it's the subject = noun)

WRONG: The weather didn't affect me getting home.

CORRECT: The weather didn't affect my getting home.

WRONG: An alarm clock prevents you being late to class.

CORRECT: An alarm clock prevents your being late to class.

# MISSION FOUR: APOSTROPHES AND DASHES AND NUMBERS, OH MY!

## APOSTROPHES

**RULE #1:** Use an apostrophe and an “s” to show possession: “the child’s toy,” “the teacher’s brilliance,” “the student’s dedication.”

→ Use an apostrophe after the existing “s” on plurals: “the students’ suggestions,” “the teachers’ demands,” “my friends’ ambitions.”

**RULE #2:** DO NOT use an apostrophe . . .

1. . . to make a noun plural: “Love you guy’s” (written by my father, who notoriously breaks this rule).
2. . . before an “s” ending of a verb: “John play’s video games occasionally.
3. . . in possessive pronouns such as hers, its, ours, theirs, yours, etc.
4. . . to form the plural names such as The Browns, The Millers, etc

You know those signs outside of people’s houses made from a chunk of a tree trunk? Both my parents and my parents-in-law have them. Guess what those signs say? “The Hallin’s” and “The Schultz’s.” ARGGGGHHH!

## DASHES

In general, dashes (—) suggest a change of the sentence’s pace by alerting the reader to something unexpected or supplemental. You form a dash by using two hyphens; most word processing software will turn two hyphens into one dash.

**RULE #1:** Do not overuse the dash; use it sparingly and effectively.

EX: The major news shows on television—Prime Time Live, Dateline NBC, and 20/20—al covered the Pope’s death.

EX: All creatures—including humans—are confusing and inconsistent.

## NUMBERS

**RULE #1:** In non-technical writing, spell out numbers up to one hundred and round numbers greater than one hundred.

EX: Approximately twenty-five students failed the exam, but more than two hundred and fifty passed.

**RULE #2:** When using several numbers in a sentence or when a spelled-out number requires more than three words, use numerals.

EX: This new law affects nearly 11,000 taxpayers, substantially more than the 200 originally projected. Of those affected, 2,100 filled out the papers incorrectly and another 657 called the office for help.

**RULE #3:** Spell out a number at the start of a sentence.

EX: Twelve dogs live on that farm.

## MISSION FIVE: CORRECTING CONFUSED AND MISUSED WORDS

1. Accept is a verb meaning “to receive” whereas except is a preposition meaning “excluding.”  
→ I will accept any delivery from UPS except those delivered by imposters.
2. Affect is a verb meaning “to influence” whereas effect is a noun meaning “result.”  
→ Ann affected my view of language, and the effect was my becoming an English teacher.
3. Among is used when referring to three or more things whereas between is a reference to two things.  
→ The decision was discussed among all members of the team, but the tension was really between the captain and her assistant.
4. Cannot is one word.  
→ Frank cannot attend your party next week.
5. Everyone is an indefinite pronoun whereas every one means “each and every one.”  
→ Everyone must be involved with the fundraising and must attend every one of the carwashes.
6. Fewer is used for things that can be counted; less is used for ideas, abstractions, and things that cannot be individually counted.  
→ As fewer students participate in campus activities, we seem to have less “campus spirit.”
7. \*Its is a possessive pronoun whereas it's is a contraction for “it is.”  
→ A tree loses its leaves when it's time for winter to arrive.
8. Not only. . . but also; both parts must be stated.  
→ Not only is she a chef, but she is also a scuba diver.
9. Number is used for things that can be counted; amount is used for things or ideas that are general, abstract, or that cannot be counted.  
→ The number of students present at the volley ball game affected the amount of encouragement the players received.
10. Quotation is the noun form whereas quote is the verb.  
→ I said, and I quote, “this quotation makes no sense.”
11. Should have/could have/would have are NOT should of/could of/would of.  
→ I should have been a pilot since I could have passed the math course, but I would have had to go to school in another state, which would have been difficult on my family.

12. Than is a conjunction used in comparisons whereas then is an adverb that shows time.  
→ His little sister was always shorter than her brothers, but then she had a growth spurt and now towers over them.
13. That is restrictive (the information provided is essential to the meaning of the sentence) whereas which is non-restrictive (the information provided is not essential to the meaning of the sentence).  
→ The traffic jam that was on the westbound side of I-94, which is a busy highway, lasted for an hour.
14. Who is used when referencing a person who is the subject of the clauses whereas whom is used when the objective form is needed.  
→ Keisha, the student who petitioned for better security on campus, carefully chose with whom she would work to meet this goal.
15. \*Their is a possessive pronoun. They're is a contraction for "they are." There is either an adverb to indicate place or an expletive—a word used when the subject of the sentence has been moved from its normal place in the sentence.  
→ I am going to put their books over there. There are several already on the table, so I'm sure they're going to pick them up soon.
16. \*To is a preposition or an infinitive verb, but too is an adverb; two is a number.  
→ Hans is too proud to ask for help, especially when he only has two more driveways to shovel.
17. \*Your is a possessive pronoun whereas you're is a contraction for "you are."  
→ Make sure you consult your guidance counselor before you're taking classes that will not help in your future area of study.

**\*Tip:** When you stop using contractions in your writing, you will avoid these errors.

# THE FINAL MISSION: DESTROYING DULL SENTENCE STARTERS

## **RULE #1: Avoid “there are.”**

YUCK: There are three main challenges all college students face. These challenged are time management, increased freedom, and rigorous academics.

BETTER: All college students face three main challenges: time management, increased freedom, and rigorous academics.

## **RULE #2: Avoid “there were.”**

YUCK: There were many reasons why I chose to attend UWRF, but the most important one was that it has a highly regarded education program.

BETTER: UWRF's highly regarded education program was the main reason I chose to attend, though I had several other reasons.

## **RULE #3: Avoid “there was.”**

YUCK: There are many times in life where our experiences shape who we are. These experiences can be good or bad. These experiences can happen at any time.

BETTER: Experiences, whether good or bad, occur throughout our lives and shape who we are as members of society.

## **RULE #4: Avoid “it is.”**

YUCK: It is important to recognize that not all college students live on campus. Some people commute and this makes bad weather a problem.

BETTER: Since all students do not live on campus, bad weather can be a problem for commuting students.

## **RULE #5: Avoid “it does/it doesn't.”**

YUCK: It doesn't matter why you are absent from class because an absence is an absence no matter what.

BETTER: Regardless of the reason for your being absent, an absence is an absence no matter what.

## **RULE #6: Avoid “it may/it may not.”**

YUCK: It may seem that trying to avoid these problems in your writing is a waste of time, but you will want to know this technique in the future.

BETTER: Though one may feel these exercises are a waste of time, one must also recognize that these techniques will be crucial in future writing situations.

## **RULE #7: Avoid starting several sentences in a row similarly.**

YUCK: Shakespeare is considered one of the greatest writers of all time. Shakespeare is the playwright behind at least thirty-seven dramas. Shakespeare also wrote 154 sonnets and several lengthier poems.

BETTER: One of the greatest writers of all time is none other than William Shakespeare, the writer behind at least thirty-seven dramas, 154 sonnets, and several lengthier poems, including “Venus and Adonis.”