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## Common Grammatical and Stylistic Problems

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### COMMON PROBLEMS IN LOGICAL DEVELOPMENT:

**Hasty Generalization**--One example does not "prove" an argument. Avoid using a single quote or an isolated incident as the basis for your argument. Look for additional supporting evidence to buttress your point before proceeding. Ask if your reading makes sense for all parts of the text, or only a single section.

**"Occam's" Razor**--William of Ockham's Law is a touchstone for thinkers in both the sciences and the humanities. The rule is, when there are two possible answers to a question, assume the simplest solution is correct unless you can find extra evidence to support the more complex solution.

**Arguing from the Negative**--While it is not fallacious to base an argument on the absence of something in the text, the process is trickier than basing an argument upon what the author actually wrote. The wise student avoids the former and focuses on the latter.

**Lack of Chronological Awareness**--Keep in mind the ways that geography and time can link or separate texts from each other. It is simply not logically valid to suggest that *Beowulf's* influence "reveals itself in Homer's work," especially since the Homeric epics originate centuries before *Beowulf* was written.

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### COMMON GRAMMATICAL PROBLEMS

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#### Comma usage:

1. **Comma splice**--A comma cannot attach two complete sentences to each other by itself. To fix this problem, replace the comma with a semicolon (if the two ideas are closely related), or add a conjunction to the comma, or turn one clause into a dependent clause by using a subordinate conjunction:

No. Beowulf is a heroic figure, he protects the Danes while upholding Anglo-Saxon ideals.  
Yes! Beowulf is a heroic figure because he protects the Danes while upholding Anglo-Saxon ideals.  
Yes! Beowulf is a heroic figure; he protects the Danes while upholding Anglo-Saxon ideals.

2. **Introductory clause**--When a sentence is composed of two clauses, normally the writer separates the clauses with a comma when the first clause is dependent and the second is independent. When the first clause is independent and the second clause is dependent, no comma is necessary.

No. Because Pope Gregory sent missionaries the Anglo-Saxons used a Roman alphabet.  
No. The Anglo-Saxons used a Roman alphabet, because Pope Gregory sent missionaries.  
Yes! Because Pope Gregory sent missionaries, the Anglo-Saxons used a Roman alphabet.  
Yes! The Anglo-Saxons used a Roman alphabet because Pope Gregory sent missionaries.

\*\*\*Note: When a sentence begins with a short introductory *phrase* (as opposed to an introductory *clause*), the use of a comma is optional.

Okay! That night the Geatish warriors slept fitfully.  
Also Okay! That night, the Geatish warriors slept fitfully.

#### Pronoun Antecedents:

**Gender/Number**--Writers often stumble when they come to *him*, *her*, *he*, and *she*. When students try to avoid sexist language, they often resort to using *they* or *their* in reference to a singular subject. Always be aware of how many people are in a sentence. If you want to avoid sexist language, do not resort to awkward phrases like *his/her* or *him/her*. Instead, make the subject of your sentence plural and then use *their* or *them*. That way, a writer simultaneously avoids sexist language, improper grammar, and awkward phrasing.

No. In the court of the Danes, one must keep their thoughts to themselves.  
No. In the court of the Danes, one must keep his/her thoughts to himself/herself.  
Yes! In the court of the Danes, individuals must keep their thoughts to themselves.

\*\*\*Note: Please do not confuse *there* and *their*. Likewise, be certain to use *it's* as a contraction for *it is* and use *its* as the possessive pronoun, and remember that "alot" is not a word.

## COMMON PROBLEMS WITH CITATION

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Always introduce the quote. Quotes should not stand by themselves as a separate sentence. Your introduction should tie the quote to your meaning by referring to your larger point.

- No.       Aelfwine's loyalty is dual in nature. "To me that is the greatest of griefs: he was both my kinsman and my lord" (74).
- Yes!      Aelfwine reveals the dual nature of his fealty when he laments, "To me that is the greatest of griefs: he was both my kinsman and my lord" (74).

When punctuating quotations, in MLA format there is a set formula to determine where the punctuation marks and parenthetical documentation belong.

1. When quoting an informal source (something that is not published material), the punctuation marks are enclosed in the quotation marks. This rule also applies to the quotation marks around the titles of modern poems, songs, and short stories.

One student observes, "Grendel is the archetype of the cranky neighbor who hates noise."  
"Grendel," one student observes, "is the archetype of the cranky neighbor who hates noise."  
The alert reader should consider the beginning of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan."

2. When quoting a formal source, you must attribute the citation. Follow Professor Boren's handout, and if his handout does not cover any questions you have, consult the [MLA](#) for explanation; the fourth edition of the [MLA Handbook](#) is the current standard for papers in English literature--though individual professors may prefer that you use Turabian or Chicago format. With parenthetical citation, punctuation comes *after* the attribution, rather than being enclosed by the quotation marks.

- As Jonson observes, "Blah blah blah blah" (42).
- or        One author has observed that "Blah blah blah" (Jonson 42).

3. The exception to this rule is the indented block quote. Block quotes should be introduced by a colon, after which the text is indented (on both sides for Boren's guideline, or on the right-hand side alone in 4th edition [MLA](#)). In this type of quote, *no quotation marks are necessary*, and the final punctuation mark *precedes* the parenthetical citation. This is the *only* case in which the citation is left "dangling" in the air.

The importance of warfare to the Anglo-Saxons manifests in their tendency to name swords and recount each weapon's history, as in the following speech:

Can you, my friend, recognize that sword, the rare iron-blade, that your father, beloved man, bore to battle his last time in armor, where the Danes slew him, the fierce Scyldings, got possession of the battle-field, when Withergeld lay dead, after the fall of warriors? Now here some son of his murderers walks in the hall . . . and wears the treasure that you should rightly possess. (53)

4. If you are quoting from more than one source, such as two different stories, the origin of the quote may become unclear from context. If so, include the author's last name within the parenthetical citation, or in the case of canonical works, include the standard scholarly abbreviation. If you do not include a name or abbreviation, the convention is to assume that the quote comes from the same source as the previous citation. If you are quoting from more than one source, you should include a works cited page. I will not require a works cited page if the only book you are using is the *Norton Anthology*. Use page numbers for prose texts, but use line numbers for poetry. Be sure to include slant marks to indicate change of line if the quotation is not long enough to require block quotes.

**Basic Works Cited format:** (normally double-spaced in alphabetical order by author's last name, on a separate sheet of paper from the main essay)

#### Works Cited

Author's last name, Author's first name. Title. Place of Publication: Publishing Company,  
date published.

McPherson, James M. The Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.

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### COMMON STYLISTIC PROBLEMS

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**Transitions**--Each sentence should relate logically to the sentence before and after it, to the paragraph it is a part of, and to the paper as a whole. Similarly, each paragraph should follow the previous paragraph logically and should anticipate or allow for the next. Avoid overusing words like *and*, *but*, *thus*, or *however* to start a paragraph (or any sentence). These words are not strong constructions; they tend to distract your reader from the larger meaning of the paper. Reliance on *and* as a major transition between ideas does not make for strong writing.

**Lack of concision**--Good writing says something original and meaningful. Excellent writing says the same thing in half the space. Three obstacles stand between the writer and concision: passive voice, nominalization, and "stacked" adjectives and adverbs.

1. **Passive Voice**--Passive voice occurs when the grammatical subject of a sentence receives the action rather than performing it. While the use of passive voice is not grammatically incorrect, it often leads to unclear or stilted writing, especially in academic arguments in which the student dons a "scholarly" tone. Develop the habit of converting passive voice sentences into active voice as you proofread.

No.      The monster is being slain by the hero with a magic sword while the hall is guarded by the men.  
Yes!     The hero slays the monster with a magic sword while the men guard the hall.  
No.      The text that has been produced by the poet contains alliterative verse.  
Yes!     The poet produced a text containing alliterative verse.  
No.      Even today, scholarship is being undertaken to determine the date of the poem.  
Yes!     Even today, scholars attempt to determine the date of the poem.

2. **Nominalization**--Nominalization is the use of a noun in a sentence where a verb could convey identical meaning more efficiently, or the use of a noun-phrase when a single noun would do. Again, nominalization is not grammatically incorrect, but it is a stylistic flaw that writers can improve through careful word craft.

No.      The men doing research conducted a survey of the campus.  
Yes!     The researchers surveyed the campus.  
No.      Grendel took a taste of the Geat-pie that his mother had made as a cooking project.  
Yes!     Grendel tasted the Geat-pie his mother had cooked.

3. **Stacking adjectives, adverbs**--Good writers use adjectives and adverbs for vivid description. Excellent writers use vivid *nouns* and *verbs* and thus avoid "stacking" the sentence with extra words.

No.      With a strange expression, the small figure moved quickly away from the dead body.  
Yes!     With a grimace, the dwarf fled from the corpse.

The soul of a sentence lies in verbs and concrete nouns. Abstract words like *very*, *just*, *really*, and *great* take up space and prevent readers from touching the beauty of your prose. To achieve concision, delete these unnecessary words. Recall Mark Twain's motto: "When in doubt, strike it out!"

No.      Unferth is just a troublemaker with a very big ego who really wants all the attention of the king.  
Yes!     Unferth is an egoistical troublemaker who wants the king's attention.