

THE CENTER FOR THEOLOGICAL WRITING  
DUKE DIVINITY SCHOOL

**GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION BASICS**

Many of us become nervous when we hear the word “grammar.” It takes us back to our school days, and we conjure an image of that one exacting school teacher who would suddenly pounce on us and ask us to define a gerund. Gerund?

Our unease with grammar often stems from our inability to *analyze* language—we have difficulty identifying, say, parts of speech when we see a sentence, or distinguishing between clauses and phrases. However, all of us know how to *write* a sentence, even if we occasionally go on a little too long or cut off our thoughts before they are complete (see *sentence fragments*). So even if we can’t identify a gerund and fear *writing* (ah, there’s a gerund—a word ending in *ing* that functions as a noun!), we can still communicate.

Stanley Fish in *How To Write A Sentence* says that a sentence “can be summarized in two statements: (1) a sentence is an organization of items in the world; and (2) a sentence is a structure of logical relationships” (16). The key words here are “organization” and “logical.” What sentences do is to organize information logically. They can be as simple as “Mary wept” or “Jesus walks” (subject/predicate). They can be “Darkness was on the face of the deep” or “Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law.” But they cannot be “Father-in-law was flock keeping of his Moses.” That doesn’t make sense. It lacks logic and organization.

So now that you know that writing sentences really isn’t a problem most of the time, let’s take a look at some grammar and punctuation basics that occasionally we don’t get quite right and would like to straighten out. Let’s move beyond writing to writing *well*.

**SENTENCES: COMMON ERRORS**

**RUN-ONS**

Run-on sentences are usually the result of poor punctuation. Sometimes a run-on sentence lacks punctuation, so that two sentences become fused:

*Joseph put on his lovely coat it was later stripped from him.*

or it is improperly joined/spliced by a comma:

*Joseph put on his lovely coat, it was later stripped from him.*

The **comma splice** is a very common of error, but in order to understand why it is an error, it might be useful to review some basics.

A simple sentence has a subject and a predicate:

*Joseph walked. Mary rode.*

These sentences (or independent clauses) can be joined in several ways. By using a semi-colon:

*Joseph walked; Mary rode.*

or by using a **coordinating conjunction** (such as *and, because, but, or, nor, since, so*):

*Joseph walked, but Mary rode.*

*The cattle knelt, and the donkey brayed.*

*Matthew prayed, and then he fasted for seven days.*

As you can see, **you need a comma before coordinating conjunctions** (when they join two complete sentences). Don't use the conjunction alone.

However, when you combine

two (or more) subjects with the same verb (*Mary and Joseph danced*)

or

one subject with two (or more) verbs (*Moses walked and climbed*)

you **don't** put a comma before the conjunction.

So remember, *Mary walked, and Joseph danced* is fine, but *Mary walked, Joseph danced* is a **comma splice**.

Yes, this is a common error, and you will see it frequently, but professors will still nail you for it. And yes, you might see the comma splice used in contemporary literature, but unless you are writing a novel for your biblical exegesis class, avoid it!

## FRAGMENTS

A fragment occurs when you don't have a complete sentence. Few people make this mistake when they are writing simple sentences, but as your sentence grows, and often, as you are concentrating on *what* you are saying rather than *how* you are saying it, you might forget to finish one of your thoughts. For example:

*Students are encouraged to explore the many Centers and Initiatives housed within Duke Divinity School. Including the Institute on Care at the End of Life and the Clergy Health Initiative. (fragment)*

Here's another fragment:

*Because Mary and Joseph fled with Jesus from Bethlehem.*

This last example is probably easy to identify because when you read it attentively, you can sense that there is an **incomplete thought** present.

Another way to think about sentence fragments is as **dependent clauses**. These are incomplete units of thought that *depend* on something else to complete them. Thus, if we added "*their firstborn was not slaughtered*" to the above fragment, we would have a complete thought:

*Their firstborn was not slaughtered, because Mary and Joseph fled with Jesus from Bethlehem.*

or

*Because Mary and Joseph fled with Jesus from Bethlehem, their firstborn was not slaughtered.*

Dependent clauses often begin with the following words (also known as subordinating conjunctions):

<i>after</i>	<i>even</i>	<i>since</i>	<i>whenever</i>
<i>although</i>	<i>though</i>	<i>so that</i>	<i>where</i>
<i>as</i>	<i>for</i>	<i>than</i>	<i>wherever</i>
<i>as if</i>	<i>how</i>	<i>that</i>	<i>whether</i>
<i>as though</i>	<i>if</i>	<i>though</i>	<i>which</i>
<i>because</i>	<i>in order</i>	<i>unless</i>	<i>while</i>
<i>before</i>	<i>that</i>	<i>until</i>	<i>who</i>
<i>even if</i>	<i>rather</i>	<i>what</i>	<i>whom</i>
	<i>than</i>	<i>when</i>	<i>whose</i>

*why*

and if you put any of these words before a sentence (without rewriting it), you'll end up with a fragment:

*When Luther wrote his ninety-five theses . . .*

*After he nailed them to the cathedral door . . .*

*Although Adam and Eve were told not to eat the forbidden fruit . . .*

(Note that when a dependent clause introduces a sentence, it is usually followed by a comma:  
*When Luther wrote his ninety-five theses, the course of history would be changed.*)

The **relative pronouns** *that*, *which*, *who*, *whom*, and *whose* also make dependent the clauses that follow them:

*The man **who** wrote the Summa Theologica . . .*

*Several books **that** were required for the course . . .*

Again, you should *feel* that these clauses are not complete; they need main verbs to complete them: *The man who wrote the Summa Theologica was Thomas Aquinas. Several books that were required for the course cost over a hundred dollars.*

## COMMAS

A few years ago the British author Lynne Truss published *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*—a grammar book that topped a number of best-seller lists. In the book, Truss examines the havoc (and hilarity) that can be caused when commas are omitted or put in the wrong place. To illustrate her point, Truss tells a story about a panda, who—depending on where you place your commas—is either a benign vegetarian or a hungry killer:

*The panda eats shoots and leaves* (that is, the panda consumes a diet of vegetable matter)

*The panda eats, shoots, and leaves* (that is, the panda eats, fires a gun, and exits!)

(Note that this last sentence contains a serial comma—a comma placed after the penultimate item in a list and before “and.” This, however, is optional, and omitting it does not change the meaning in this case.)

Or consider the difference between

*No theologians, please and No theologians please*

The first exhibits a dislike of theologians who are presumably banned in some way, while the second statement conveys an inability to give pleasure on the part of theological scholars.

As we have already seen with run-on sentences, commas matter!

### **COMMAS WITH RESTRICTIVE AND NONRESTRICTIVE CLAUSES OR PHRASES**

A restrictive clause or phrase provides information that enables us to identify something.

Let's imagine the following situation: You are wandering along and run into the twelve disciples. Your friend points to them and says, "Look at that disciple." You are confused. There are twelve of them. So you say, "Which disciple do you mean?" "Why, the disciple who is wearing the red robe." Now you can identify the relevant disciple.

*"who is wearing the red robe"* is the **restrictive** clause. It does **not** take commas. It provides **essential** information.

Now let us imagine another scenario. You are wandering along and come across some disciples you know: Peter, Philip, and Bartholomew. Your friend says, "Look at that disciple," but you are not sure to whom he is pointing. "Who do you mean?" you ask. And your friend—who tends to be talkative and likes to provide lots of information says, "Why, Peter, who is wearing a red robe."

*“, who is wearing a red robe”* is a **nonessential** or **nonrestrictive** clause. It adds extra information that isn't needed to identify the person (the name "Peter" will do the work of identifying the person in this case). This clause does **use commas**. (*Richard Hays, the Dean of the Divinity School, also teaches theology.*)

Now compare these two sentences:

*My parish, which is in Wilmington, has a lovely parsonage.*

*My parish that is in Wilmington has a lovely parsonage.*

The first implies that you have one parish, and it is in Wilmington. The second suggests that you have more than one parish; you are specifying which one you are talking about.

### **DANGLING AND MISPLACED MODIFIERS**

Every year the Edward Bulwer-Lytton competition solicits entrants to submit the “best” worst sentence they can write. (Bulwer-Lytton was a Victorian novelist, famed for the sentence that begins with “It was a dark and stormy night . . .” and for writing rather cumbersome prose.) One way to fashion a really bad sentence is to put modifying words, phrases, or clauses in the wrong place. For example:

*Old and infertile, God had surprises in store for Sarah.* (Try *Old and infertile, Sarah was in for a big surprise.*)

*Jesus both addressed the Jews and the Gentiles.* (Jesus seems to be *doing* just one thing but talking to *two* groups. Try *Jesus addressed both the Jews and the Gentiles.*)

*Waving some palms, the donkey was welcomed.* (Was the donkey waving the palms? Who was waving the palms? Try *Waving some palms, the crowd welcomed the donkey.*)

“Old and infertile” and “both” in the above sentences are clearly **misplaced modifiers**. “Waving some palms” is a **dangling modifier**; the phrase suggests some action but no one is specified as doing the action.

### **SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT**

We all know that subjects and verbs should agree; that is, a singular subject takes a singular verb—*Saint Theresa prays*—and a plural subject takes a plural verb—*The nuns pray*—but sometimes we get confused.

This can happen when a noun and a verb get separated by intervening information:

*The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the Triune God.* (Plural subjects/verb)  
*The Triune God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—works in mysterious ways.*  
(Theological conundrums aside, this sentence’s subject is singular!)

Confusion may also occur when we misidentify the subject—*The box of candles was costly*; when we forget that singular items separated by “or” need a singular verb—*Peter or Paul is preaching*; or when we use collective nouns—*The Pentateuch contains five books.*

### **PRONOUNS**

Pronouns keep us from having to repeat ourselves and sounding silly:

*James wanted to go to James's house to get James's sandals before James went fishing with James's brother.*

This sentence is easily rectified with pronouns. But pronouns can also be the source of much confusion as you need to use the right kind depending on its function in the sentence. If the pronoun is used as a **subject**, then it must come from the following list:

<i>I</i>	<i>we</i>
<i>you</i>	<i>you</i>
<i>he, she, it</i>	<i>they</i>

*I am the church; you are the church; we are the church together.*

If the pronoun is used as an **object** of any kind, then it must be from the following list:

<i>me</i>	<i>us</i>
<i>you</i>	<i>you</i>
<i>him, her, it</i>	<i>them</i>

*The snake tempted her . . .*

The three ways pronouns are most often used as objects are as **direct objects**, **indirect objects**, or as **objects of a preposition**:

**Direct object:** object of the action of a verb

*Jesus blessed them. He taught us.*

**Indirect object:** the noun or pronoun that receives the direct object; the secondary object of the action

*Jesus gave them his blessing. They gave him a headache.*

**Object of a preposition:**

*Jesus gave it to them. He died for us.*

When used singly, pronouns usually don't cause trouble. **The most common errors come whenever pronouns are combined with other nouns or pronouns.** If you treat each word individually, you can usually solve the problem:

*Professor X gave Larry and I extra reading.*

This is wrong, wrong, wrong!

*Professor X gave Larry extra reading.*  
*Professor X gave me extra reading.*  
*Professor X gave Larry and me extra reading.*

If you are confused—especially if a sentence *sounds* strange—try breaking it down into single units:

*I spoke to him. I spoke to Larry. I spoke to him and Larry. (Yes, it is correct.)*  
*We went to the lecture with her. We went to the lecture with Judas. We went to the lecture with Judas and her.*

### **TRICKY HOMONYMS**

Homonyms are words that sound alike—*to/too/two*—but have different meanings. Be careful to select the word you want.

*affect/effect*  
*complement/compliment*  
*it's/its*  
*eminent/immanent/imminent*  
*precede/proceed*  
*prescribe/proscribe*  
*principal/principle*  
*they're/their/there*  
*who's/whose*

### **MORE ON PUNCTUATION**

#### **SEMI-COLONS**

Use semi-colons instead of commas if the items in a series are long or contain commas of their own:

*The assignments will include a short paper; a presentation, which may involve a partner; and an exam on both the reading and the lectures.*

Also use a semi-colon (not a comma!) to join two independent clauses with a conjunctive adverb (*however, in fact, indeed, thus, therefore, etc.*):

*The readings will not be covered in lecture; however, you will still be responsible for them on the exam.*

## COLONS

Colons are used primarily to introduce a list or a phrase/clause that elaborates what comes before it:

*Your grade derives from three requirements: a presentation, an exam, and a paper.  
The paper suffered from one serious shortcoming: a lack of documentation.*

Note, however, that when you put a colon before a list, you shouldn't put a verb before the colon:

*The readings for this week ~~are~~: Ambrose, Augustine, and Aquinas. (Wrong)  
Read the following authors: Ambrose, Augustine, and Aquinas. (Correct)*

## QUOTATION (AND OTHER PUNCTUATION) MARKS

When you use quotation marks, other punctuation marks may be placed either inside or outside the quotes. The difficulty is knowing what to put where.

Periods and commas always go inside quotation marks, regardless of their relation to the material quoted. (Yes, you can find printed examples of the opposite, and the British do not follow this convention.)

*"There are ample doses of conventional religious sentiment throughout the novel."  
Hughes dismisses this "mediocre melodrama," despite its obvious political importance.*

Semi-colons, colons, exclamation points, and question marks (;!?) go inside the quotation marks only if

- they are part of the original quote; otherwise, they go outside:  
*He asked, "Did you read the passage?"  
Did he set the story "Revelation"?  
Jonah exclaimed, "I've been eaten by a fish!"  
Jonah was surprised when "the Lord provided a large fish"!*

- Because semi-colons and colons are rarely part of the quoted material, they usually end up outside:

*Brown gave a critique of “the woes of modernity”; that is, consumer greed . . .*

*Brown gave a critique of “the woes of modernity”: greed, lust, . . .*

- You can also follow quoted material with a dash:

*Brown gave a critique of “the woes of modernity”—woes he described as . . .*

### **(PARENTHESES) AND [BRACKETS]**

Use parentheses to include asides in your own writing:

*Babylon was located in part of ancient Mesopotamia (present day Iraq).*

Use brackets to add material within a quotation:

*Judas said, “I will betray him [Jesus] tonight.”*

or to frame extra material that is already placed within parentheses:

*Martin Luther King was both a great orator and writer (his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” [1963] is studied in many writing classes).*

### **APOSTROPHES AND NUMBERS**

When referring to a decade, an “s” is added to the date:

*the nineteen-fifties = 1950s*

If you use the two-digit version of a date, an apostrophe is used to represent the numbers omitted:

*1950s = ‘50s*

However, if you are writing about events that occurred over several centuries (say the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries), omitting the century digits could be confusing. When you refer to the ‘40s, do you mean the 1840s or the 1940s? Also confusing can be a two-digit abbreviation and a possessive “s”: *He was out of step with the ‘50s’ sexual mores.* In such cases, it is better to reword the sentence altogether: *He was out of step with the sexual mores of the ‘50s.*

Use an apostrophe to show ownership:

*It is Jeremiah's book* (singular ownership)

*Those are the girls' books* (plural ownership)

But what to do with singular words that end in “s” such as Jesus, Aquinas, or Boas? Here you have a choice. You can either add just an apostrophe—*Aquinas'*—or an apostrophe and an “s”—*Aquinas's*. However, usually “Jesus” just takes an apostrophe—*Jesus'*.

### **ELLIPSES . . .**

A series of several periods, called an ellipsis, is used to indicate omitted material. Use three, with a single space between them, in the middle of a sentence. If the ellipsis ends a sentence, use four periods:

*“Then the word of the Lord came to him . . . and he was afraid.”*

*“The Lord's command was given to Abraham. . . . He obeyed it.”*

The grammar and punctuation presented here represent some of the common problems that writers run into, but they may not be issues for all students.

For further help, go to the “Grammar Links” on our website. Also, an excellent source of information is The Purdue Online Writing Lab at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>