

Micro-Skills

Mechanical

1. Correct word usage
2. Word order
3. Missing words: verbs, prepositions, etc.
4. Use of articles (a, the)
5. Correct use of quotations
6. Plurals vs. possessives
7. Commas and other punctuation

Correct word usage

Choosing the wrong word or phrase can make your meaning unclear. Please see the page [Troublesome Words and Phrases](#) for help on common word-choice mistakes.

Word order

Most English sentences follow a pattern of subject (S), verb (V), object (O), such as in the sentence “I (subject) wrote (verb) the paper (object)”. This basic order may change with the presence of an indirect object (I). The main variable in such instances is the word “to”.

- Example of SVIO (without “to”): I wrote my friend a letter.
- Example of SVOI (with “to”): I wrote a letter to my friend.

The structures of these two patterns do not mix. For example, it is incorrect to say “I wrote to my friend a letter” or “I wrote a letter my friend”.

Missing words

The most common categories of missing words are verbs and prepositions. Any subject needs to be paired with a verb. Prepositions link an object to another word in the sentence (going to the game, putting on a coat).

Incorrect Usage (verb):

- The employees wait for the boss. He ten minutes late.

Correct Usage (verb):

- The employees wait for the boss. He is ten minutes late.

Incorrect Usage (preposition):

- When I got class, the room was empty.

Correct Usage (preposition):

- When I got to class, the room was empty.

Use of articles (a, the)

Nouns generally require either an indefinite (a/an) or definite (the) article. One main exception to this rule is when using a generic plural, such as “Motorcycles are always so loud”. In most other cases, you will want to use some sort of article to distinguish between a specific noun and a general one. Definite articles (the) are used for nouns that are definite and specific, or have already been referenced or mentioned in the text. They are also used to indicate previously mentioned plural nouns (Here are the books I’ve been looking for).

Incorrect:

- As I walked into building, I saw large company logo.

Correct:

- As I walked into the building, I saw the large company logo.

Indefinite articles (a/an) are used before singular nouns that are unspecified. “A” is the correct article for nouns beginning with consonants and nouns that begin with a consonant sound (university: yoo-niversity). Otherwise, “an” is the correct indefinite pronoun.

Incorrect:

- On Tuesday, yellow taxi almost ran me over! It’s a outrage!

Correct:

- On Tuesday, a yellow taxi almost ran me over! It’s an outrage!

Correct use of quotations

Whenever putting something in quotation marks, always use double quotes, even if you’re only quoting a single word:

Incorrect:

- At Cost Corp., we believe the customer is ‘sometimes’ right.

Correct:

- At Cost Corp., we believe the customer is “sometimes” right.

There are three basic rules for placing punctuation in conjunction with a quotation:

1. Commas and periods ALWAYS go inside the quotation marks.

Incorrect:

- “Give me liberty or give me death”, said Patrick Henry.
- The CEO has promised us “more and better benefits”.

Correct:

- “Give me liberty or give me death,” said Patrick Henry.
- The CEO has promised us “more and better benefits.”

2. Colons and semicolons ALWAYS go outside the quotation marks.

Incorrect:

- The CEO has promised us “more and better benefits;” however, he hasn’t made clear what those are.
- The expert claims “there are three ways to save money on insurance payments:” cutting costs, cutting coverage, and cutting claims.

Correct:

- The CEO has promised us “more and better benefits”; however, he hasn’t made clear what those are.
- The expert claims “there are three ways to save money on insurance payments”: cutting costs, cutting coverage, and cutting claims.

3. Question marks and exclamation points MAY go inside or outside the quotation marks, depending on whether the question mark or exclamation point is punctuating just the material inside the quotation marks or the whole sentence. If the question mark or exclamation point belongs to ONLY the quoted material, it goes inside the quotes. If it’s punctuating the whole sentence, it goes outside the quotes.

Incorrect:

- Patrick Henry said, “Give me liberty or give me death”!
- Has the CEO truly provided us with “more and better benefits?”

Correct:

- Patrick Henry said, “Give me liberty or give me death!”
- Has the CEO truly provided us with “more and better benefits”?

Plurals vs. possessives

Many students have trouble remembering when a word is plural, when it is possessive, and when it is plural possessive. A possessive indicates ownership or belonging (I picked up the man’s briefcase), and a plural indicates that there is more than one of something (The men dropped their briefcases). A plural possessive means that more than one person or entity owns something else (The CPAs’ jobs are all under threat). The placement of the apostrophe is the main issue here.

You need to use an apostrophe whenever you want to show that someone owns something. If you fail to use an apostrophe with possessives, your sentence will make no sense. For instance:

- Incorrect: “The dogs breakfast was cold.”
- Correct: “The dog’s breakfast was cold.”

On the other hand, you don’t want to use an apostrophe with non-possessive plurals. If you use an apostrophe with plurals, your sentence will make no sense. For instance:

- Incorrect: “The dog’s liked their cold breakfast.”
- Correct: “The dogs liked their cold breakfast.”

There are seven basic rules that govern the use of apostrophes to form the possessive:

1. Add an apostrophe plus an S to most singular nouns and to plural nouns that do not end in S.

Singular nouns

- chicken's life
- woman's bag
- the law's power

Plural nouns not ending in S

- geese's pecking
- women's rights
- children's friends

2. Add an apostrophe plus an S to singular nouns that end in S or an S sound.

- Jess's racquet
- Getz's friends

Exception: Use the apostrophe by itself with singular words ending in S when the possessive does not add another syllable to the word:

- Texas' first settlement
- Jesus' words

3. Add only an apostrophe to plural nouns that end in S.

- dogs' leashes
- hostesses' efforts
- students' opinions
- Smiths' home

4. Indicate possession only at the end of a compound or hyphenated words.

- president-elect's decision
- U.S. Post Office's efficiency

5. Indicate possession only once when two nouns share ownership.

- Peg and Al's store
- Vorhees and Goetz's offices

6. But when ownership is separate, each noun shows possession.

- Peg's and Al's education
- Vorhees' and Goetz's offices

7. DO NOT use an apostrophe with personal pronouns. The forms "it's" and "who's" are contractions for "it is" and "who is" and shouldn't be confused with the possessive pronouns "its" and "whose."

- It's (it is) an idea that has its (possessive) opponents alarmed.
- Who's (who is) to say whose (possessive) opinion is right?

Don't add apostrophes to yours, hers, his, ours, or theirs.

The rules listed above work exactly the same way for acronyms (words made up of the first letters of a title or phrase, such as CEO or CPA).

- The plural of CEO is CEOs; it means more than one CEO.
- The possessive of CEO is CEO's; it will come before something that belongs to a single CEO. For instance: the CEO's retirement package.
- The plural possessive of CEO is CEOs'; it will come before something that belongs to more than one CEO. For instance: the CEOs' retirement packages.

Commas and other punctuation

Commas do a variety of things in a sentence, including:

- Separate words or groups of words in a list or parallel construction
- Set off introductory elements, interruptions, and words moved from their usual position
- Coordinate grammatical structures
- Prevent misreading and create emphasis

Reading aloud is NOT a good test for comma placement. There are very specific rules that govern comma placement in English. Because it's not always possible to place your commas by ear, it's worth spending a few minutes learning the basics.

There are a few basic rules to remember for placing commas:

1. Words, clauses, and phrases of equal value arranged in a series are separated by commas. Whenever you have a list of items in a sentence place commas between the items. Usually the last item in a series is preceded by the conjunction "and." You can either put a comma before this "and" or leave it out, but you should be consistent in using or losing it. (This type of punctuation is also called the "serial comma.")

Incorrect Usage:

- A successful business must provide its employees with pencils paper and paid vacations.

Correct Usage:

- Any self-respecting eccentric billionaire must hoard rubies, diamonds, and empty Kleenex boxes.

2. A comma comes between two independent clauses joined by coordinating conjunctions, such as “and,” “but,” “nor,” “neither,” “for,” or “so.” A “clause” is a group of words that contains a noun and a verb. If the sentence includes words that modify that noun and verb, those modifiers are considered part of the clause as well. (See the [“Parts of a Sentence: A Brief Primer”](#) page for more on nouns, verbs, modifiers, and phrases and clauses.) A clause is “independent” if it can stand alone as a short sentence.

Incorrect Usage:

- The company president wants a copy of your interoffice memo but I’m sorry to say that my dog ate all remaining copies.
- I did not realize that my email would be preserved in the company files nor that the janitor would find it so amusing.
- My employer has offered me two alternatives neither of which appeals to me at all.

Correct Usage:

- The recruiter asked me to sign the contract in blood, but I don’t consider that binding.
- The new accountant in cubicle 39D is clearly highly skilled, and also has entrancing hazel eyes.
- My manager has just dismissed me, so I intend to put a squid in her desk.

3. Use a comma after a dependent clause, usually a fairly long one, that precedes an independent clause. A clause is “dependent” if it requires another clause to support or complete its meaning. Dependent clauses often begin with subordinating conjunctions such as “if,” “because,” “after,” “although,” “since,” “unless,” “whether,” and “until.”

Incorrect Usage:

- Because I always hated the superintendent I quit my job and went to taxidermy school instead.
- Although she bemoans the plight of baby harp seals Wanda continues to invest in environmentally unfriendly companies.

Correct Usage:

- Since we changed the corporate dress policy, casual Fridays have gone by the wayside.
- Until I see evidence to the contrary, I will assume that my fellow employees are good and decent folk.

4. Use commas to set off the person(s) spoken to in direct address. If you are writing within quotes and addressing someone (or even reporting the fact that someone else addressed someone), you use commas around the addressee's name.

Incorrect Usage:

- Mr. Kendrick said, "Come here Hitchens and bring me those papers I asked for."

Correct Usage:

- Hitchens replied, "I will be there in a moment, Mr. Kendrick, after I finish typing the papers."

5. Words that follow a noun or pronoun and identify it are set off by commas if the words are not essential to the meaning of the sentence.

To determine whether modifying words and phrases are essential to the meaning of the sentence, you can try a couple of tests. Imagine placing the words in parentheses. Does the sentence still read properly? If so, then the words are not essential. If this test doesn't work, try taking the words out completely. How much has the sentence's meaning changed? If it has changed little, then the words are not essential. If the meaning is seriously changed or impaired, the words are essential.

Incorrect Usage:

- The photocopy machine smoking and crackling rolled down the hall.

Correct Usage:

- Rock Throughput, Acme's second-in-command, chose a safari outfit for the upcoming presentation.

Don't, however, use commas if the word or phrase is essential to the meaning of the sentence.

Incorrect Usage:

- Billionaire, Bill Gates, got a pie in the face on Tuesday.

Correct Usage:

- Poverty-rights advocate Lurleen Reynolds enjoyed the sight very much.

6. A comma is necessary between two adjectives when they modify the same noun. To determine whether an adjective modifies a noun or another adjective, try inserting the word “and” between the two adjectives. If the sentence makes sense, then the adjective modifies the noun. If the sentence reads oddly, the adjective probably modifies the other adjective.

Incorrect Usage:

- The exhausted traders let out a weak throaty cheer.

Correct Usage:

- Ms. Fitzsimmons is a valuable client, but she is also a whiny, imperious brat.

However, if the first adjective modifies the idea set forth by the second adjective and the noun combined, no comma is necessary between the adjectives.

Incorrect Usage:

- For my first job interview I decided to wear my pale, yellow pantsuit.

Correct Usage:

- On my way down in the elevator I admired the bright pink slip in my hand.

7. A comma is necessary to set off contrasting expressions within a sentence. In this situation, a comma emphasizes the fact that you are switching from one idea to another. You may be modifying a notion that you have just introduced, or altering it, or undermining it. A comma is needed between the two phrases to help the reader understand your shift in tone.

Incorrect Usage:

- Gerald Whiskers is a businessman but also a gentleman.

Correct Usage:

- The more Acme resisted the FTC's request, the more implacable the agency became.
- I wanted money, not praise.

8. An adverbial phrase beginning a sentence is followed by a comma. An “adverbial phrase” is a group of words that modifies a verb. You can spot an adverbial phrase because it tells you something about how, where, when, or why an action is performed. If you’re having trouble with this rule, you should first isolate the verb in the sentence; then work backward to find the phrase that tells you more about it. This rule is a refinement of Rule #3 above.

Incorrect Usage:

- Although Susie is an able investment banker she refuses to help me balance my checkbook. (The verb is “refuses,” and the preceding phrase tells more about how/why the refusal is performed.)

Correct Usage:

- When we received our invitations to the company picnic, we were ecstatic. (The verb is “were,” and the preceding phrase tells more about when we were...whatever.)

However, once you’ve found the verb in the sentence, check to see where it comes in relation to the phrase that modifies it. If the two are side by side, you probably don’t need a comma. If they’re separated by other words, you will need a comma. Reading the sentence aloud, with an exaggerated pause where the comma would fall, will help you to determine whether a comma is necessary.

Incorrect Usage:

- Around the 15 banquet tables, hovered the hungry interns. (The verb is “hovered,” and the preceding phrase tells you where the hovering was done. Because the verb and its modifying phrase are side by side, you don’t need a comma.)

Correct Usage:

- Close to the CEO’s feet crouched a miserable-looking man. (The verb is “crouched,” and the preceding phrase tells where the crouching was done. Again, because the two are side by side, no comma is needed.)

9. A dependent clause followed by a main clause is set off by a comma. See Rule #3 for an explanation of dependent clauses. The main clause of a sentence is the one that contains the most important noun and verb. The dependent clause may contain other nouns and/or verbs, but it will not be a complete sentence or idea on its own. If the dependent clause comes first in a sentence, you should put a comma between it and the main clause.

Incorrect Usage:

- By the time Sybil got here we were too angry to speak.

Correct Usage:

- Because Lewis is so friendly, he was hired right away.

10. An introductory participial or infinitive phrase should be set off by a comma. A “participial phrase” is a phrase with a verb in the present tense ending in “-ing,” or one in the past tense ending in “-d,” “-ed,” “-n,” “-en,” or “-t.” An “infinitive phrase” is a phrase with the verb in this

form: “to laugh.” When a phrase of this kind works to introduce or describe the main clause of a sentence, you need to place a comma between it and the main clause.

Incorrect Usage:

- Snoring loudly Gruberson slumped over the conference table.
- To prevent accidents always wear a seat belt.

Correct Usage:

- Shaking her head sadly, Ms. Fuller made her way around the desk.
- To allow for scheduling errors, we try never to plan ahead.

If the introductory participial phrase immediately precedes, and forms a part of, the verb, DO NOT set it off with a comma. In this case, the sentence actually splits the verb into two, and you have to imagine putting the parts together again. Find the main verb, and try pairing it with the participle or infinitive to form a complete verb. You will have to shuffle the sentence to do this, but it will help you to see the relationship of the words. Then look back to the original sentence to see whether the introductory phrase is next to the main verb. If it is, you don’t need a comma.

Incorrect Usage:

- Standing nervously by the water cooler, was the new secretary. (Rephrase as: “The new secretary was standing nervously by the water cooler.” The verb is actually “was standing”—the sentence splits the verb into two, but since the participial phrase is right next to the main verb “was,” a comma is not needed.)

Correct Usage:

- Growing up in a rough neighborhood was my best training for the business world. (Rephrase as: “My best training for the business world was growing up in a rough neighborhood.” The verb is actually “was growing up”—the sentence splits the verb in two, but since the participial phrase is right next to the main verb “was,” a comma is not needed.)

11. Commas set off phrases and clauses that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence. What this means: A simple test for whether a phrase or clause is essential to the meaning of a sentence is to imagine placing the phrase or clause in parentheses. If the sentence reads the same after this change, you can be sure that the words in parentheses are not essential to the meaning of the sentence. You must be careful, though, that the parentheses don’t change the meaning of the sentence. If the phrase or clause is telling you exactly which summer intern is in question (the one by the photocopier), it’s essential to the meaning of the sentence. If it’s telling you something about the summer intern that you don’t really need to know (her brother

won the state wrestling championship), it's nonessential. Remember that dependent clauses can be essential to the meaning of a sentence.

Incorrect Usage:

- That summer intern, by the photocopier, knows Japanese. ("By the photocopier" is an essential clause—it tells you which summer intern we're talking about. Therefore, it does not need commas.)
- That summer intern whose brother won the state wrestling championship knows Japanese. ("Whose brother won the state wrestling championship" is a nonessential clause—it tells us an interesting fact about the intern, but doesn't define exactly which intern we mean. Therefore, it needs commas.)

Correct Usage:

- That summer intern by the photocopier knows Japanese.
- That summer intern, whose brother won the state wrestling championship, knows Japanese.

12. A comma is used to indicate omitted material readily understood from the context. Sometimes when you're repeating part of a sentence using exactly the same words, it makes sense to omit the words that the reader can supply without effort. This omission helps your style appear fluid and natural, and avoids repetition. (Be careful, however, not to omit words that your reader needs to understand a sentence easily.) When you omit these words, put a comma in their place.

Incorrect Usage:

- Some of us like cash-based accounting; others accrual.

Correct Usage:

- Some of us like cash-based accounting; others, accrual.

13. A comma is used to set off conjunctive adverbs. Conjunctive adverbs are used with a semicolon to connect independent clauses. Look for words like: "however," "moreover," "furthermore," "nevertheless," "then," "therefore," and "thus." You can hear the natural pause around these words when you use them in speech; you should, therefore, put commas around them in your writing.

Incorrect Usage:

- We understand that you are highly qualified for this position; therefore we will offer it to someone else.

- The company president appreciated your witty memo; moreover he wants to see you in his office right away.

Correct Usage:

- It is our opinion that you are the best candidate for the job; furthermore, we like your suit.
- The early bird gets the worm; however, the late employee gets the ten o'clock donut cart.

Semicolons

The semicolon is a versatile piece of punctuation, falling somewhere between the comma and the colon in strength. Use semicolons to join two complete sentences without a conjunction between them. In other words, if the two parts of your sentence could each stand alone as a complete and logical sentence, and you don't have an "and/but/or" word between them, you need to use a semicolon. If you only use a comma, you'll be writing a run-on sentence.

Incorrect Usage:

- The boss is on a rampage, run and hide.

Correct Usage:

- The boss is on a rampage; run and hide.
- (Or, "The boss is on a rampage! Run! Hide!")

Dashes

Dashes are used differently from semicolons, colons, and commas, and in the world of publishing they come in different sizes and lengths. (In most word-processing programs, typing in two hyphens in a row will automatically cause the program to place the proper kind of dash for you.) A pair of dashes is used to set off interruptions in the sentence. Whenever your sentence breaks off to talk about something that has little to do with its original subject matter, you use dashes to alert your reader. The first dash essentially means, "We're going to take a little trip now," and the second dash means, "We're back."

Incorrect Usage:

- Melvin Bunbaker, son of Gertrude and Bailey Bunbaker, and heir to the Bunbaker fortune—sneezed violently.

Correct Usage:

- Melvin Bunbaker—son of Gertrude and Bailey Bunbaker, and heir to the Bunbaker fortune—sneezed violently.M