Tips for Writing Academic Papers

by Brenda R. Lutovsky

References:


The Purdue online writing lab (OWL). (n.d.). Retrieved February 20, 2006, from http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/621/01/


Common Offenses:

A. Commas:

The comma is a misunderstood creature – small and discrete, yet dangerous if used incorrectly. You may have heard when you were younger that you use a comma at a natural pause in a sentence. This statement is not necessarily true. Also, you may have been taught to use a comma before the words and or but or other conjunctions. This, alas, is also misleading. Commas have specific purposes and uses. If you get these wrong, your statement could have quite a different meaning from that which you intended.

1. Comma use with conjunctions

Conjunctions, words such as and, but, or, nor, and others, are used to change directions in a sentence or to add meaning or weight to the first part of a sentence. Commas are used with conjunctions when the phrase after the conjunction is an INDEPENDENT CLAUSE, meaning it can stand on its own as a complete sentence without the first part of the sentence. If the phrase after the conjunction lacks a verb or noun (written or implied), do not use a comma.

   Example: My mother went to the store to pick up milk, and she went to the post office to mail a letter. (CORRECT) – Note that the part of the sentence after the AND could be a sentence on its own.

   Example: My mother went to the store to pick up milk, and went to the post office to mail a letter. (INCORRECT) – Note that the part after the AND cannot stand alone as its own sentence.
Example: My mother went to the store to pick up milk, and got eggs too.  
(INCORRECT)

2. Comma use before and after dependent clauses

Dependent clauses are those phrases that introduce a thought, describe an object, or generally add additional information to the sentence, which is not crucial information. (This last part of the sentence, here, is an example.) The general rule is to enclose the dependent phrase with commas. The comma tells the reader or speaker to pause, and it helps clarify to what the information refers. The dependent clause cannot stand alone as its own sentence.

For clauses that begin a sentence, the accepted rule is to use a comma if the phrase is three or more words long. Some people will use a comma with two words and with introductory words such as “also” or “first,” etc. Comma use in these specific situations is often a matter of personal style and taste.

Example: After my mother went to the store, she went to the post office to mail a letter.  
(CORRECT) – Note, the beginning of the sentence is dependent. The comma occurs directly before the start of the independent clause.

Example: After my mother went to the store, was when she went to the post office.  
(INCORRECT) – Note that the section after the comma is not an independent clause. In this case, the first part of the sentence acts as the noun; therefore, no comma is needed.

Example: When I finished my soda, I put the plastic bottle in the recycling bin.  
(CORRECT)

Example: The two boys rode to school on their bikes, which were red with blue stripes.  
(CORRECT) – Note the clause after the comma describes the bikes but is not crucial to understanding the sentence.

Example: With the expansion of the building higher elevators are needed.  
(INCORRECT) Without a comma, the reader may not know where the break begins. Is it before higher, or is it before elevators? The sentence is confusing without the comma; higher could modify the expansion or the elevators. In this case, I would use higher to modify elevators. (Yes, this is not a great sentence, but it makes the point.)

Example: The woman’s skirt, yellow with red polka dots, drew my attention from across the room.  
(CORRECT) – Note, the phrase in commas adds extra description to the sentence, but it is not crucial.

Example: The Sun Also Rises my favorite book, is a novel by Earnest Hemingway one of the most interesting literary figures of the early twentieth century.  
(INCORRECT) – Two mistakes occur in this sentence. First, the phrase, “my favorite book” should be enclosed in commas. Merely using one comma creates
two dependent clauses and makes the sentence confusing to read. Second, after Hemingway, another comma should be used to set off that dependent clause.

3. Comma use in series or lists

Series or lists are just that, a list of words or phrases pertaining to one particular idea. Use commas between all separate words or ideas, including the word or idea that comes directly before the AND or OR. Commas indicate discrete ideas. Often, more than one idea or words are used together to create a category, specifically in research-oriented writing, so commas are vital to understanding meaning.

Example: In the study, the researchers extracted quotations from the interviews that represented levels of leadership, dependence on others, initiative and drive, social interaction with co-workers, hours worked in the office and hours worked at home. (INCORRECT) – Note that in the categories, initiative and drive, are used as one category, separated by an “and.” At the end of the list, the reader may not know whether the last two phrases are considered one category or two categories. In this case, work at office and work at home are separate, so a comma must be used before the “and” to indicate this.

Example: My mother went to the store to buy milk, eggs, sugar, and flour. (CORRECT) – Even though the sentence could be understood without the comma, it should be used for clarification’s sake and to get you in the practice of correctly using the comma in a series.

When you have multiple items in a series and the individual items or sets of items contain commas, separate the items or sets of items using semi-colons.

Example: The four sections of the course included cognitive, moral, and psychosocial development; multicultural competence and identity development; writing, assessing, and revising learning outcomes; and designing an educational program for residential or commuter students.

4. Commas to separate adjectives modifying the same noun or idea

Often, we use multiple adjectives to modify a single word or concept. When using multiple adjectives, we must make sure that our readers know what words modify what other words. We do this by using commas correctly. If multiple adjectives modify a single noun or concept, separate them with commas. If an adjective (or adverb) modifies another adjective (modifying the noun), do not use a comma. If you can put an “and” between the words and the sentence still makes sense, use a comma.

Example: The student walked up the long, gray stairs to the top of the library. (CORRECT) – The words long and gray both modify the word stairs. The comma shows this relationship. Without the comma, you would indicate that long modifies/describes the word gray, which does not make sense.
Example: In my study, I interviewed White, sophomore, college students. (Correct) – Each term is a separate modifier.

Example: I gathered my data using a random, sample technique. (INCORRECT) – Note that random describes sample, not technique. Therefore, you should not use a comma.

B. The Apostrophe (indicating possession)

The apostrophe is a strange, little thing, whose name sounds more like a Greek tragedy than a punctuation mark, but the apostrophe is quite important in helping your reader understand what you are trying to convey, particularly when it comes to possession.

1. Possession – Singular, Plural, and when words end in S or are already plural

Use the apostrophe to indicate possession or ownership of a particular thing or idea. This usage seems fairly straightforward, but when it comes to plural possessiveness and using apostrophes with words that already end in S, the usage rules can be confusing. When writing about research results, the apostrophe can make all the difference in helping your reader understand what you are saying.

Example – Singular Possessive: I graded the student’s homework. (CORRECT) – This sentence refers to the homework (the thing possessed) of ONE student. To indicate singular possessive, place the apostrophe prior to the “s.”

Example – Plural Possessive: I graded the students’ homework. (CORRECT) – This sentence refers to the homework of MANY (or more than one) students.

Example – Plural Possessive: The seven student’s attitudes about gender were very traditional. (INCORRECT) – The number seven indicates more than one student, so the apostrophe must be placed after the “s.” If the word seven was not in the sentence, but you were referring to more than one student, the reader would not know this with this apostrophe placement.

Example – Plural Possessive (word already plural): The women’s answers were different than the men’s answers. (CORRECT) – In this sentence, women and men are already plural, so you should place the apostrophe before the “s.”

Example – Singular Possessive (word ending in S): The woman accidentally left Jonas’ book in the library. (INCORRECT) – The way this sentence is written indicates that more than one Jona possessed the book. The correct way to indicate the book belonged to Jonas is Jonas’s. Yes, this seems a bit awkward, and you may have learned that an apostrophe without the extra S will suffice, but this usage is incorrect.
FUN FACT: “It’s” is the contraction for “it is” or “it has.” “Its” is the singular possessive form of “it.” I do not suggest using either of these words in an academic paper.

C. Verb Tense Consistency

When writing academic papers, you may have difficulty determining what verb tense to use and when. Typically, if you are reporting or describing something that took place in the past or was published in the past, use past tense. However, if you are applying what you are describing to a general thesis in the present, use present tense. Also, make sure you use the same tense within individual sentences. At times, you may need to give your reader cues that you are (appropriately) changing tense.

Example: Terenzini (1998) reported that students . . . . (CORRECT) – The study was published in 1998, so it is not appropriate to use present tense (as you would when discussing a literary work)

Example: College graduates are more likely than non-college graduates to live longer and earn higher salaries (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). (CORRECT) – Even though this information has already been reported/studied, you report it in the present tense because you are not tying it to the specific time period in which it was studied. Presumably, you will apply this information to some current problem you are addressing.

D. Noun Singularity/Plurality Agreement

When writing, you must ensure that you have agreement in number between subjects and their referent pronouns.

Example: A college student in the residence hall is more likely to be involved on campus than their off-campus counterparts. (INCORRECT) – The sentence begins with a discussion of one student and then changes to the plural “their.” Often, people have difficulty using the singular in such a case as this because there is no gender-neutral singular pronoun in English. So you have two choices – either start the sentence with “college students” (plural) or use the not-so-graceful “his or her” construction.

Example: First-year students are likely to make large gains in cognitive development, particularly if they have high interactions with faculty members. (CORRECT) – Note that the word “students” agrees with the pronoun “they.”

E. Subject/Noun – Verb Agreement

Agreement is not only necessary for subjects and pronouns, but it is also necessary for subjects and verbs. When determining the subject(s), of the independent clause, do not take into consideration the intervening phrases. Even if you have more than one subject and they are all singular and separated with intervening phrases such as “as well as” or “including,” the verb
should agree with the singularity. In addition, some words that “seem” singular are actually plural; pay attention to these, and use the appropriate verbs.

Example: The heat of the summer months as well as the horde of mosquitoes at the lakes create unbearable conditions. (INCORRECT) – In this sentence, the subjects are “heat” and “horde.” Both of these subjects are singular in number, so the verb “creates” is correct to use. To make sure that you have the correct verb for your subject(s), take out the intervening phrases (usually prepositional).

Example: The lion and the tiger run more quickly than the turtle. (CORRECT) – Here you have two singular subjects, but they are connected by the word “and” which creates plurality, so the verb must agree.

Example: The researcher’s data indicates that first-year men develop at a different rate than first-year women. (INCORRECT) – The word “data,” like some other nouns of Latin descent, is the plural form of the noun. These words, in the singular form, often end in “um” or “on.”

F. Pronoun and Indirect Article Usage

Pronouns (words such as him, her, they, them, etc.), indirect articles (words such as it or some) and some direct articles (words such as these, those, or that) need to be tied to a subject in a clear and transparent fashion. Starting sentences with “it,” “this, “some,” etc. is inappropriate. Your reader must know to what or to whom you are referring at all times.

Example: The researchers found that men and women communicate differently. They gave different cues as to what they were trying to indicate. (INCORRECT) – In this example, the sentence constructions make it very unclear as to whom the “they” refers. Does it refer to the researchers? The men? The women? Both the men and the women? Rather than using the word “they,” restate the subject noun.

Example: It is known that college students make more gains in . . . . (INCORRECT) – With this sentence construction, to what does the “it” refer? If “it” refers to the gains college students make, just write “College students make more gains . . . (citation).”

Example: Professors, today, are using collaborative learning pedagogies in the classroom rather than lectures. Researchers found that these active strategies help students gain in cognitive development. (CORRECT) – Even though the second sentence uses the word “these,” the word “these” is followed by the referent subject “active strategies.” Without the referent subject, a reader skimming quickly may not know what the word “these” refers to if it is not restated (active pedagogies or lectures).
G. Comparatives

Comparatives are statements that compare one thing or person to another in some fashion. Comparatives must include both the subjects you are comparing. Often comparatives are indicated by the phrases/words more than, more likely, best, better than, etc. Leaving out key verbs or other words can create ambiguity in the comparison.

Example: Students whose parents went to college are more likely to succeed in college. (INCORRECT) – The sentence is missing the second part of the comparison. The students are more likely to succeed than WHOM?? You must include the “WHOM” to have a sentence that makes sense.

Example: Some professors consider using active and collaborative teaching strategies to be better for students’ cognitive development than using a strict lecture format. (CORRECT) – The sentence has both pieces of the comparison. It answers the question, “better than what?”

Example: Sorority members are more likely to have same gender friends than fraternity members. (INCORRECT) – Even though this sentence has both parts of the comparison, it is still confusing. Are sorority members more likely to be friends with other women than to be friends with fraternity men? Or are sorority members more likely than fraternity members to have same-gender friends? You must be specific and precise in your comparisons so your reader knows what you mean.

H. Split Infinitives/Verbs

An infinitive phrase is a construction that pairs “to” with a verb (to run, to be, to change, etc.). You should not insert an adverb or “not” between the “to” and the verb. Follow the same rules with other multiple verb constructions.

Example: The little boy wanted to quickly run away. (INCORRECT) – The infinitive phrase is “split” by the adverb quickly. The correct way to write the sentence is The little boy wanted to run quickly away.

Example: I told my friend to not leave the party without me. (INCORRECT) – The correct way to write the sentence is I told my friend not to leave the party without me.

I. Who versus That usage

Who and that are relative pronouns, meaning that they link subordinate clauses to nouns. When using who and that, who is used with people, and that is used with animals or things.

Example: The professor that teaches the class is my advisor. (INCORRECT) – Note that the clause, teaches the class, is linked to the noun professor with the word that. This construction is wrong. The sentence should be worded – The professor who teaches the class is my advisor.
Example: The dog that bit me was taken to the vet to be checked for rabies. (CORRECT)  
– The use of the word that to link dog to bit me (a descriptor about the dog) is correct.

Fun Fact: Another set of relative pronouns that often gets confused is that and which. Use “that” when the following clause is essential to the meaning of the sentence, and use “which” when the following clause is not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Also, enclose the “which” clause in commas. (This use of “which” is preferred in APA style.)

Example: The workers removed the trees that were in the way of the highway construction. (CORRECT) – Without the restrictive (or descriptive) clause, the meaning of the sentence is lost.

Example: Snakes, which scare me to death, can be found in all parts of the United States. (CORRECT) – The clause does not need to be in the sentence for the sentence to make sense.

J. Affect versus Effect usage

Affect and effect are commonly confused and used incorrectly. Generally, effect is a noun and affect is a verb. Affect, as a verb, means to influence. Effect as a noun means an outcome or consequence of some action. Affect and effect can be used as a noun and verb respectively, but the meanings are different. As a noun, affect means a strong feeling as distinguished from thought or action. Effect as a verb means to cause purposeful change – example: The new law effected immediate change in the . . . .

Example: The effect of active pedagogies on student learning is appreciable. (CORRECT) – In this example, effect is the noun.

Example: Active and collaborative pedagogies affect students positively. (CORRECT) – In this example, affect is the verb.

Recently, the word impact has gained favor as both a noun and a verb that is synonymous with the words affect or influence. While these are popular usages of the word, these usages are not accepted by all. The conventional use of the word impact is as a noun or a verb that means that two bodies connect with force (think “thud” here). Be judicious with you use of the word impact; there are better and more descriptive words you can use in the place of the word impact.

K. Hyphenated, Compound Adjectives

At times, adjectives that modify other adjectives are a necessary part of the sentence to give the main adjective meaning. When this is the case, the two words should be hyphenated. These are called compound adjectives. Compound adjectives occur directly before the nouns they are modifying; the same phrase later in a sentence is not considered a compound adjective. Also, when using two or more compound adjectives in a sentence before the word they modify, you can drop the second word if it is the same for all adjectives.
Example: The first-year students looked more confused than the second-year students did when walking around campus. (CORRECT) – Note that the removal of either the word year or the numerical denotation would render the sentence meaningless.

Example: Students in their first year seem more confused than do students in their second year of college. (CORRECT) – Note that in this construction, the adjective phrase follows what it modifies, so it does not need to be hyphenated.

Example: The researcher studied the long- and short-term effects of the intervention. (CORRECT)

Example: The come-what-may attitude of the students frustrated the teacher. (CORRECT) – In this sentence, “come-what-may” is a temporary compound adjective. The use of hyphens helps the reader correctly interpret the meaning of the sentence.

Fun Fact: In your reference list, if a hyphenated word or adjective is the first word of the title or after a colon, do not capitalize the second word after the hyphen.

L. Explaining Your Statements/Conclusions

The last point of this Tips sheet is that you must explain your statements. If you make a statement that implies or states a “fact” or even an “opinion,” make sure that you explain why you state what you state. Usually the explanation involves a citation to an empirical study. Do not make a blanket statement without some kind of support behind it.