

## Essay Editing Checklist

Below is a list of common stylistic and mechanical difficulties. As you're revising your work to put together a final draft of your essay, read this sheet carefully and weed the problems it details out of your writing. Should you need more clarification of a particular problem than I give on this sheet, consult a handbook of English grammar and usage such as *The Holt Handbook* or *Hodges' Harbrace College Handbook*. (Copies are available in the library and the University Writing Center if you don't have one.) If the problem still isn't clear to you, don't hesitate to ask me about it after class or during my office hours.

1. Use a comma before (not after) a coordinating conjunction that links independent clauses.
2. Don't use a comma between the parts of a compound subject, a compound predicate, a compound predicate complement, or a compound object.
3. Use a semicolon between independent clauses that have no coordinating conjunction linking them. Don't use a semicolon between an independent clause and any kind of dependent construction—that is, any construction that couldn't stand on its own as a sentence.
4. Don't run two independent clauses together with only a comma—without a coordinating conjunction as well. Doing so produces the dreaded comma splice, the bane of aging English teachers everywhere.
5. Don't run two independent clauses together without either a comma and coordinating conjunction or a semicolon. Doing so creates a fused sentence.
6. Don't punctuate any construction other than an independent clause—one containing both a subject and a predicate and no initial subordinating element—as a sentence. If you do, a sentence fragment is the result—one of the prime causes of hives in English teachers.
7. Singular nouns require singular verbs as predicates; plural nouns require plural verbs. Be careful not to be fooled into an error by a phrase that separates your subject and predicate.
8. Singular nouns require singular pronouns; plural nouns take plural pronouns. Remember that most indefinite pronouns, such as *everyone*, *anyone*, *none*, and *each*, are considered singular.
9. Usually, introductory words and phrases are followed by a comma (as is *usually* at the beginning of this sentence).
10. Nonrestrictive words and phrases—that is, those not essential to a sentence's meaning, are set off by commas.
11. Restrictive words and phrases—those that are essential to a sentence's meaning—do not take commas.
12. Don't separate a sentence's subject from its predicate with a comma unless a nonrestrictive element comes between them.
13. The titles of films, magazines, and books should be either underlined or italicized; they shouldn't be put in quotation marks, boldfaced, or made all capitals. Shorter works, such as individual poems, magazine articles, and short stories, take quotation marks. But do not underline, italicize, or use quotation marks with your own essay's title (except where it incorporates a movie or book's or other work's title).
14. Use present tense when discussing the content of a film, book, or review; you do not, however, have to change past-tense verbs within a quotation.  
Example: In "The Open Boat," Stephen Crane suggests that conventional religious beliefs are not relevant to people in immediately dangerous situations. To get this point across symbolically, he presents four men who are adrift in a lifeboat and says that "None of them knew the color of the sky. Their eyes glanced level, and were fastened upon the waves that swept toward them" (147).

15. When you place a page number in parentheses at the end of a quotation, the quotation marks come first, then the parentheses, and then any necessary punctuation, such as a comma or period (unless it's a question mark that is part of the quotation, which goes inside the parentheses): At the end of "Young Goodman Brown," the narrator says of the protagonist, "his dying hour was gloom" (174).

Toward the end of "Young Goodman Brown," the narrator asks the reader, "Had Young Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest, and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?" (174)

16. In any use of quotation marks without a parenthetical page reference, commas and periods go inside the quotation marks, while colons and semicolons go outside them.

17. Avoid mixed constructions—sentences that begin with one kind of grammatical construction and then shift illogically to another.

Incorrect: The reason Herman Melville wrote *Pierre* was because he was angry at many critics' hostile reviews of *Moby-Dick*. (The complement of the verb *was* should be a noun or noun phrase; *because* makes the phrase adverbial instead.)

Correct: The reason Herman Melville wrote *Pierre* was that he was angry at many critics' hostile reviews of *Moby-Dick*. Or The reason Herman Melville wrote *Pierre* was his anger at many critics' hostile reviews of *Moby-Dick*.

18. Avoid dangling modifiers: participial, gerund, infinitive, or adverb phrases that don't refer logically to other words or phrases in the sentence. Especially common are opening phrases that should modify the subject of their sentence but don't logically do so.

Incorrect: As a little girl, Harriet Beecher Stowe's father often called his daughter "a genius." (Harriet Beecher Stowe's father was a little girl? Now there's an interesting family!)

Correct: When Harriet Beecher Stowe was a little girl, her father often called her "a genius."

19. Whenever you use quotation marks, make sure that what you place within them is in fact an exact transcription of the source's words. Remember also that whenever you quote something that's already in quotation marks in your source you need two sets of quotation marks, a single set within a double: In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Tom Sawyer says, "Now we'll start this band of robbers and call it Tom Sawyer's Gang. Everybody that wants to join has got to take an oath, and write his name in blood" (15).

20. When you use ellipsis marks ( . . . ) to indicate that you're leaving something out of a quotation, use only three dots, leave a space before and after each one, and don't forget to add a period, unspaced, if you leave out the end of one sentence or more and then begin another sentence.

Something left out within a sentence: Near the end of "Young Goodman Brown," we are told that "The good old minister . . . bestowed a blessing, as he passed, on Goodman Brown" (174).

Something left out at the end of a sentence: Near the end of "Young Goodman Brown," we are told that Brown's minister "bestowed a blessing, as he passed . . ." (174).

End of one sentence left out, followed by another sentence: Near the end of "Young Goodman Brown," the narrator says that "The good old minister was taking a walk along the grave-yard, to get an appetite for breakfast and meditate his sermon. . . . Old Deacon Gookin was at domestic worship, and the holy words of his prayer were heard through the open window" (174).

#### **You don't need ellipses at the beginning of a quotation:**

Incorrect: Near the end of "Young Goodman Brown," we are told that Deacon Gookin ". . . bestowed a blessing, as he passed, on Goodman Brown" (174).

Correct: Near the end of "Young Goodman Brown," we are told that Deacon Gookin "bestowed a blessing, as he passed, on Goodman Brown" (174).

21. When you use a quotation, make sure to integrate it into your own thoughts by showing in introductory or follow-up phrases of your own its relevance to what precedes and follows it and what your source is for it; don't just drop in a complete sentence or more of quotation all by itself.

Incorrect: Many critics over the years have pointed out the importance of *Citizen Kane* to the film noir movement. "The American cinema of the 1940s was to grow progressively darker, both thematically and photographically, thanks in part to the enormous influence of *Citizen Kane*" (Giannetti 407).

Correct: Many critics over the years have pointed out the importance of *Citizen Kane* to the film noir movement. As

Louis Giannetti says, for instance, "The American cinema of the 1940s was to grow progressively darker, both thematically and photographically, thanks in part to the enormous influence of *Citizen Kane*" (407).

Remember also that any quotation must be integrated in such a way that the whole sentence makes grammatical and syntactical sense.

Incorrect: Describing the protagonist's grief in "The Story of an Hour," the narrator says, "rose and fell tumultuously" (387). (No subject for the verbs *rose and fell*.)

Correct: Describing the protagonist's grief in "The Story of an Hour," the narrator says, "her bosom rose and fell tumultuously" (387).

Incorrect: In "The Story of an Hour," we are told that "She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength" (387). (No antecedent for the pronoun *she*. In such cases, change the pronoun to a noun or proper name and then begin the quotation after the name.)

Correct: In "The Story of an Hour," we are told that Louise Mallard "was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength" (387).

22. Hyphenate groups of words serving as a single adjectival unit before a noun.

23. When two independent clauses are governed in meaning by a single preposition, conjunction, or other element, don't use a comma between them; use only a coordinating conjunction.

Incorrect: Pauline Kael says that Orson Welles had only a small part in writing *Citizen Kane*, and the Screenwriters' Guild didn't want him to take credit for it.

Correct: Pauline Kael says that Orson Welles had only a small part in writing *Citizen Kane* and the Screenwriters' Guild didn't want him to take credit for it. (Both the "Orson Welles" clause and the "Screenwriters' Guild" clause are governed by *says that*.)

24. Don't use *this* or *that* or any other pronoun or possessive adjective when it has no single, clearly discernible noun to serve as its antecedent.

25. With *says*, *states*, or any similar word, separate a direct quotation from its introductory tag with a comma: In *Understanding Movies*, Giannetti says, "The aesthetic qualities of deep-focus photography permitted composition in depth" (141).

However, when *that* or any other restrictive element immediately precedes the quotation do not use a comma: In *Understanding Movies*, Giannetti says that "The aesthetic qualities of deep-focus photography permitted composition in depth."

Sally Fitzgerald describes Flannery O'Connor as having "enriched her stay at Iowa by close reading of authors to whom she had never been exposed at college."

When your introductory phrase is a complete clause, use a colon rather than a comma between it and the quotation:

R. P. Blackmur notes one essential source for understanding Hawthorne's theory of composition: "Perhaps Hawthorne's clearest statement about the mode in which he wrote most of his tales comes at the beginning of 'The Threefold Destiny, A Faery Legend.'"

26. Use two unspaced hyphens to indicate a dash in typing: It was William Dean Howells--not Henry James--who first said, "Live all you can--it's a mistake not to." (Most word-processing programs will automatically change two unspaced hyphens to an unbroken two-space dash: from -- to -. This is fine.)

27. A gerund—the *-ing* form (present participle) of a verb used as a noun—requires the possessive case preceding it. Incorrect: T. S. Eliot publishing "The Waste Land" in 1922 is one of the most significant events in twentieth-century literature.

Correct: T. S. Eliot's publishing "The Waste Land" in 1922 is one of the most significant events in twentieth-century literature.

28. Follow the prescribed Modern Language Association (MLA) form when preparing your Works Cited page. For a quick guide to this style, go to the English department's homepage, click on the "Resources" tab, then click on "MLA Formatting"; or just go directly to <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/> For more in-depth coverage, consult the *MLA Handbook* in either hard or electronic copy.

29. Technically speaking, a possessive adjective can't serve as the antecedent of a pronoun; an antecedent must be a noun.

Incorrect: In Frederick Douglass' autobiography he attacks various contemporary rationalizations of slavery.

(*Frederick Douglass'* is a possessive adjective, not a noun, so it doesn't work as the antecedent for the pronoun *he*.)

Correct: In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass attacks various contemporary rationalizations of slavery.

30. Use apostrophes only in contractions (*can't*, *won't*, etc.) and, with some exceptions, in possessives.

To show singular possession when the word does not end in *s*, use an apostrophe followed by an *s*: Mark Twain's writings are among the most frequently banned works of American Literature.

For singular possessives of words that do end in *s*, likewise use an apostrophe and another *s*: Samuel Clemens's pen name is Mark Twain. (In cases in which the added *s* might be cumbersome, you can leave it off: Moses' supposed authorship of Genesis has long been discredited.)

For plural possessives, use only an apostrophe: The Hawthornes' first home was the Old Manse, in Concord, Massachusetts.

Do not use an apostrophe with a plural word that is not possessive: The Hawthornes, the Adamses, the Jameses, and the Lowells are all families who made multi-generational contributions to American literature.

Do not use an apostrophe with possessive pronouns: *its*, *hers*, etc.