

Common Grammatical Problems / How to Fix them

⇒ Dangling Modifiers

A dangling modifier is a phrase or clause that — because of its proximity — seems to modify a word it could not logically modify. One of the most common dangling modifiers occurs in the following sentence: "Hopefully, the project will succeed." "Hopefully" is an adverb that appears to modify the noun "project," the subject of the sentence. But how can a project be hopeful? To fix the sentence, we need to show who's really doing the hoping: "We hope that the project will succeed."

Another very common dangling modifier appears in the following sentence construction: "Based on our observations, the project will succeed." Again, the modifier — "based" — cannot logically modify the noun to which it is attached — "project." "The project" is not "based on our observations." To fix the sentence, we need to say, "On the basis of our observations, we believe the project will succeed."

⇒ Inconsistent Verb Tenses

Make sure you use past tense consistently throughout a sentence and use past perfect tense when it is called for. For example, in the following sentence there is a lack of consistency in tense; it shifts from past to present: "Government officials said that they are correcting the problem." Since the verb in the main clause is stated in the past tense — "said" — the verb in the subordinate clause — "are correcting" — should also be stated in the past tense. The sentence should read "Government officials said that they were correcting the problem." If, however, the action of the dependent clause was completed before the action in the main clause, use past perfect tense in the dependent clause. For example, "Government officials said that they had corrected the problem."

⇒ Noun Strings

Try to avoid long strings of nouns, such as the following, that show no grammatical relationships among the many nouns: "Army Fiscal Year 1990 Apache Helicopter Spare and Repair Parts Budget Request." Add possessive case and prepositions to clarify how the nouns relate to each other. Revision: "The Army's Fiscal Year 1990 Budget Request for Spare and Repair Parts for the Apache Helicopter."



⇒ Faculty Agreement in Number

One of the most common pronoun agreement problems occurs when one tries to avoid the sexist use of pronouns. For example, the following sentence is inconsistent in number: "Each student must clean their own room." The plural pronoun "their" does not agree in number with the singular "Each student" and the singular "room." To fix the sentence, you could say "Each student must clean his or her own room." If you find the "his or her" construction awkward, make all pronouns and associated nouns in the sentence plural: "All students must clean their own rooms."

⇒ Unclear Antecedents for "This," "Which," and "It"

An "antecedent" is the noun a pronoun refers to. When using "this," "which," or "it," make sure there is no question about what the pronoun's antecedent is. In the following case, the antecedent for "this" is unclear: "The company needs accurate data for its estimates. This is the purpose of the task force." Similarly, the antecedent for "which" is unclear in this passage: "The company needs accurate data for its estimates, which is the purpose of the task force." To make the passages clearer, change them to: "The company needs accurate data for its estimates. Providing such data is the purpose of the task force."

In the following sentence, the antecedent for "it" is unclear: "When the government workers who should be classed as administrators are enumerated, it reaches staggering proportions." Revise to eliminate the vague pronoun as follows: "When the government workers who should be classed as administrators are enumerated, the total is staggering."

⇒ Failure to Use Possessive Case with a Gerund

A gerund is the present participle of the verb (the verbal form ending in "ing") when used as a noun. The possessive case should be used for modifiers of a gerund: "I would appreciate your attending the meeting." "It is all contingent on the President's signing the bill." If, however, you find this construction awkward or impossible, reword the sentence. For instance, to avoid awkward construction such as the following, revise: "This is one of several steps taken by the Secretary to prevent the ceiling on expenditures' being broken again next year." Revision: "This is one of several steps taken by the Secretary to prevent the ceiling on expenditures from being broken again next year."

⇒ Misuse of "That" and "Which"

The key to determining when to use "that" and when to use "which" is in deciding whether the clause or phrase that follows is essential to defining what you mean (it's "restrictive") or is simply parenthetical information (it's "nonrestrictive"). Use "that" with restrictive phrases or clauses and "which" with nonrestrictive phrases or clauses. For example, if I am holding up only one book and say "I'll give you this book, which explains grammatical rules," you don't need to know that the book is about grammar to know which book I mean. If I'm holding up a history book and a grammar book and I say "I'll give you the book that explains grammatical rules," you need to know that the book explains grammatical rules to know which book I mean.

As a rule of thumb, use "which" and set the phrase or clause off by commas if the information that follows is parenthetical, or unessential to the meaning of your sentence. Use "that" and don't set your phrase or clause off by commas when the information that follows is essential to the meaning of your sentence.