

TABOOS – Common Writing Errors to Avoid

(Created by Philip Dacey, SMSU Professor Emeritus, 1939-2016)

Professor Marianne Murphy Zarzana

Southwest Minnesota State University, Marshall, Minnesota

The errors identified below are ones students frequently make. Writing well is, of course, not just a matter of avoiding errors, but an error-free paper is like a clean window through which the reader looks; it helps display clearly what you have to say. Errors say, “I don’t care enough about you to take pains with this communication.” Ideally, over the course of the semester, you will not be violating any of these taboos and will have moved on to more advanced considerations about writing, positive ones, not just what to avoid but what to do to enhance your work. (On your essays, T plus a number will indicate one of the following taboos.)

“We live at the level of our language. Whatever we can articulate we can imagine or understand or explore.” – Ellen Gilchrist

I. GRAMMAR

1. Be wary of like/as confusion. “Like” is a preposition and must take an object: he looks like trouble. “Like” cannot precede a clause (clauses, unlike phrases, have verbs); “as” can precede a clause because it’s a conjunction. “Winston tastes good like a cigarette should” is grammatically incorrect (as the ad writers knew). Sometimes “that” can replace “like”: I feel alone, (like) that nobody cares.” Or try “as if.”

2. “Then,” “thus,” and “therefore” are adverbs, not conjunctions, and therefore cannot connect two independent clauses, even with a comma. Not this: “He knocked on the door, then she came to the window.” One alternative is: “When he knocked on the door, she came, etc.”

3. Sentence fragments (not complete units), run-on sentences (two complete units lacking punctuation), and—the most common of the three—comma splices (two complete units punctuated but inadequately) are all major sentence errors. They have a place in good writing—where they may be not errors but effective variations from the norm—but not in a composition class where you have an obligation to demonstrate your ability to walk before you try to run. Don’t use commas like a seasoning, sprinkling them in here and there according to taste; a comma is a signal, like an automobile’s blinker, and should be used only when necessary and then purposefully and precisely. (3A. Commas often work as pairs—two or none—to set off a phrase from the sentence’s core.)

4. "Everyone did their job." The pronouns do not agree. Change "their" to "his" or "her" or "his or her," or change sentence to "They all did their jobs." "None" (no one) is singular.
5. "He acted better than I (acted)" is correct, as is "He likes her better than (he likes) me." "He talked about her and me" is also correct.
6. "Hopefully" does not mean "I hope." Compare: "Hopefully, we waited for the plane to land and bring our son back to us" with "Hopefully, you'll pass." George Kennan: "There is reason to hope that the process thus hopefully begun will not stop at that point."
7. "Less" power (not countable) but "fewer" potatoes (countable). Less fat, fewer calories; not less calories (though "less" is frequently similarly misused).
8. Avoid dangling modifiers: "Out of gas, I left the car and walked home."
9. Lie (recline), lay, lain, lying; lay (set down), laid, laying.
10. Sure/surely. Not "It sure seemed" but "It surely seemed." (See also 35.)
11. Don't leave pronouns undefined: "Lyrics have been censored. This violates the constitution." "This" has no explicit antecedent. Instead: "Censoring lyrics violates the constitution." 11A. Nor say, "I saw this girl" if she hasn't yet been mentioned; say, "I saw a girl."

II. PUNCTUATION

12. Use hyphens to connect two words that act as one word: "green-handled shovel," "around-the-clock love," or "money-minded person."
13. Reserve exclamation points for exclamatory sentences. Not "I looked great!" but "How handsome he looked!" If you want to get emotion into your writing, use the appropriate language, not punctuation marks. Also, capitalized and underlined language is like a person who SHOUTS TO MAKE HIS POINT!!!
14. Its=possessive (give the book its due); it's=it is (it's time to go).
15. Words in direct address need commas: "Hey, Dad, how are you doing?"

16. "The dog chewed on the shoe feeling playful." Comma is needed between "shoe" and "feeling" as signal it is not the shoe feeling playful but the subject, "dog." Or reorder: "Feeling playful, the dog chewed on the shoe."

17. As a rule, give each quoted speaker a new paragraph. 17A. Punctuation goes inside closing quotation marks: "I see," he said.

18. Comma usually before "but" rather than after: "I like it but, I don't have it" is incorrect.

19. "Myself" is not a synonym for "me."

III. SPELLING

20. Don't confuse "there/their," "then/than," or "lose/loose." "I hope the Giants loose there game." To loose means to loosen, not to lose.

21. The spelling of "alright" is not all right.

22. "MN" is only for the convenience of the post office. In essays, spell out Minnesota and other states.

23. Capitalize Mom and Dad if they're used as proper names as opposed to identifications of roles or blood relationships. "She is my mom/mother." "Here comes Mom." Don't be afraid of the words "mother" and "father" in essays even though you perhaps seldom use those words in speaking.

24. Not "alot" but "a lot," two words. "Snuck" is nonstandard; avoid.

25. Know the difference between effect (result, a noun) and affect (influence, a verb).

26. Never confuse "to," "too," and "two." (Also, don't confuse "tutu" and "tattoo.")

27. "Farther" refers to physically measurable progress, "further" to other progress: farther along the road, further with his career.

28. Not "we use to" but "we used to." Suppose/supposed. "Should of" for "should have" is an illiteracy. "She should have come." Not "gonna" for "going to." "Once in a while," not "once and

a while.” “All of a sudden,” not “all of the sudden.” Anyway, the phrase is so conventional that it probably ought to be avoided.

IV. STYLE

29. Avoid using “real” or “really.” They get overworked in speaking and usually add little or even detract in writing. He was real/really strong.

30. Words like “very” and “pretty,” meant to intensify, usually do the reverse. Try this sentence without the intensifiers: “It was really raining very hard, and I was pretty soaked.” “Just” can often be dropped.

31. “Which” must refer back to a specific word. Not “I am going to visit my mother, which she likes,” but “I am going to pay my mother a visit, which will please her.”

32. Don’t be a so-ing machine. “So” is a greatly overused word and is often the sign of a beginning writer. It’s OK to use it in a “so/that” clause. Do not use it as an intensifier by itself: He was so happy! Do not use it as a connective in narration: “So then I called the dog.” (“Then” is also an overworked word in narration. Usually you don’t need it.) If “I called the dog” sounds too abrupt, connect it somehow to what precedes or follows. Drop “such” in “It was such an honor.”

33. “Being” is often an ugly, unnecessary word: “I spent a week being stuck in the house.” Drop “being.” If you use it in a sentence, look for a way of getting rid of it: change “He was happy, being that his sister came” to “Because his sister came, he was happy” or “His sister’s coming made him happy.”

34. Avoid slang like “awesome” and “freaked out.” Lightning can be awesome; Nike shoes cannot. Strive for a formality that is nevertheless not stiff or false. “Get into”: “The crowd started getting into the football game” reveals the dangers of using slang. 34A. “Kids” are goats and “guys” are wires or ropes that act as anchors; find more formal alternatives.

35. Don’t begin sentences with “Boy,” “Well,” “Sure,” “Yes,” “Man,” “True,” “See,” “Wow,” “Oh,” or “Now.” Such words are usually excessively informal.

36. “Nice” is overused. Restrict its meaning to “precise, sharp, exact.” He made a nice point in the argument or a nice pass between defenders. 36A. “Neat” means orderly, is not an all-

purpose praise word. 36B. “Great” means too many things and is used too frequently to be useful; avoid it.

37. Avoid clichés (worn-out, overused phrases). *Scared to death. Seemed like an eternity. Mother Nature. Hit the ceiling. Little do we know. Sticks out in my mind. I can’t believe my eyes.* When originally used, years ago, these were imaginative phrases; now they’re like stale food. The overused “I will never forget” is unnecessary—if you haven’t forgotten it yet, the reader assumes you probably “will never forget it.”

38. “Fun” is not an adjective. “I had a fun time” is common in speech but inadequate in writing. The alternatives are nearly limitless, depending on what you did. Or, rather than relying on a vague adjective, describe exactly what you did—“We laughed a lot the whole time we were together.” Generally, nouns and verbs are the basic building blocks of sentences, which are themselves the primary unit of communication in essays. Rely on those two parts of speech rather than the adjective.

39. “Needless to say” calls attention to your inclusion of something extraneous. Delete.

40. Don’t address your audience directly: “You see…” A listening audience is always implied in your essay. Don’t give the reader commands; i.e., use declarative rather than imperative sentences. Don’t write, “Remember when,” or, “Imagine,” or, “Just think.” Likewise, avoid rhetorical questions to the reader: “Who would not be appalled by such behavior?” Such questions are cheap and bully a reader; politicians love them.

41. Don’t be a would-pecker. Try to use simple past tense whenever you can. Avoid repeating “would” frequently if it’s not clearly necessary.

42. Nothing can be “very unique.” One can’t be “very pregnant”—you are or you aren’t. Uniqueness by definition is singular and not a state of being to be compared to other states of being.

43. “Paranoid” is not synonymous with “afraid.” It refers to exaggerated, unwarranted, unreasonable fear and suggests mental illness.

44. As a rule, name places. If you begin: “At 6 a.m. I am jogging through the sleeping city,” identify the city. Is the lake you’re passing Lake Harriet in Minneapolis or Cottonwood Lake?

45. Avoid beginning a sentence or main clause with “There” and a form of “to be” (is, are, was, were, etc.). Remove the underlined words: “There are hundreds of people who are alive because of machines.” Craft your sentences the way a carpenter crafts a chair.

46. “It” and “is” are weak words to be avoided when possible. “Because it appears to be taking Philip a long time in the bathroom, I decide it is time to check on him” can become “Because Philip appears to be taking a long time in the bathroom, I decide to check on him.” With no loss, you gain more economy and emphasis. “When a family is in this situation, it is no longer that person on life support who is suffering. It is the family that suffers, having to watch a loved one die.” Change to: “With a family in this situation, the person on life support doesn’t suffer; the family suffers, having to watch a loved one die.”

46B. Drop what’s in bold: “**By** letting animals run free, **it** will create chaos;” “**The first time** I (first) met John’s mother **was** at a football game.”

47. Complete comparisons: “Our product is cheaper.” Cheaper than it used to be or cheaper than other similar products? Say exactly what you mean to avoid confusion.

48. “Into,” not “in,” implies motion: “She comes into the room” rather than “comes in the room.”

49. Don’t combine declarative and interrogative sentences: “I knew he was going out, or why else would he have gotten dressed up?” The end punctuation is necessarily illogical when you do.

50. The “not only...but also” structure requires unrepetitive parallels immediately after the two parts. “Not only is John sick, but also is depressed” should be: “John is not only sick but also depressed.”

51. In personal writing, don’t let “I” disappear into “we.” You can always speak for the former but seldom for the latter.

52. “I like apples, pears, and eating peanuts” is an example of lack of parallel grammatical construction in a series. Instead, write “I like apples, pears and peanuts.”

53. Three independent clauses connected by “and” and “and” is an example of loose sentence structure, to be remedied by changing one “and” to a comma or subordinating one or two of the clauses.

54. Avoid cartoon-like sound effects: “Wham!” or “Pop!” Rather: “The engine popped when we started it.”

55. Bananas come in bunches, not people.