

## **Writing Help in English: Common punctuation and wording errors in American English**

With glossary – all items with an asterisk are defined in the glossary

Stephen Pizer, 12 January 2011

1) *Comma and*: Before a coordinate conjunction (and, or, but, so) there must not be a comma unless the items connected are main clauses (or unless there are three or more entities being connected). In particular, when two predicates\* have a common subject\*, do not put a comma before the conjunction. If you want a comma, add a subject to the second predicate.

Alternatively, if you leave off the comma but find it ambiguous what the conjunction connects, solve the problem by repeating a word used in the first predicate. Here is an example: Instead of “Those properties are usually obtained from illumination cues [cannot put a comma here] and then used to generate surfaces”, repeat “are” to obtain “Those properties are usually obtained from illumination cues and then are used to generate surfaces”

2) *Colon*: A colon connects a noun or a sentence with another noun or sentence, respectively, or list thereof that follows from the first. It is not allowed to use a colon introducing a list after a verb or after a preposition. Thus write “Trees make 1) leaves; 2) branches; 3) roots.” Do not put a colon after that word “make”. Similarly, write “Citrus fruits consist of 1) oranges; 2) lemons; 3) limes; 4) grapefruits.” Do not put a colon after the word “of”.

3) *Introductory phrases*: A short introductory prepositional phrase\* or adverb that modifies the verb of a sentence should not be followed by a comma. If an introductory phrase contains a verb or if a phrase or adverb is used to set the logic of the sentence flow (e.g., “moreover”, “therefore”, “consequently”, “as a result”), then a comma should follow the phrase or adverb.

4) *So that*: “So that” means “in order that”. Do not use it to indicate a consequence. For that use “so”.

5) *Semi-colons*: “and” vs. semi-colon to connect two main clauses\*. Two main clauses forming a compound sentence must be connected by either a co-ordinate conjunction or by a semi-colon (never by a comma). “And” makes a tighter connection, and it should not be used to connect two syntactically non-equivalent main clauses. For example, use a semi-colon, not “and” to connect an imperative\* and a declarative\* clause – or make this into two separate sentences.

6) *Which and that*: First, be very careful about commas between a noun and a relative pronoun (“which”, “that”, “who”, “where”, “when”). When you do not use a comma, the relative clause\* is part of the definition of the noun (the clause is restrictive), and when you do use a comma, it is just explaining some more about the noun or pronoun. In “The boy who bounced the ball” you are distinguishing which boy you are talking about, whereas in “The boy, who bounced the ball,” you assume the reader knows to which boy you are referring and just are mentioning that he bounced the ball. Whether you use a comma changes the meaning in an important way. Also, in choosing between “which” and “that”, it is best to use “, which”, i.e., when the relative clause is non-restrictive, and to use “that” with no comma, i.e., when the relative clause is restrictive.

7) *Commas in closing phrases or clauses*: A comma after the predicate\* makes what follows it parenthetical, i.e., a side comment. A common error is to use a comma before an ending subordinate clause\* that is important to the sentence. For example, “, because” or “, since” makes the explanation in the following clause of little importance even though you may want it to be a central idea in the sentence.

8) *Adverbs and corresponding conjunctions*: It is not OK to use an adverb when a conjunction is needed or vice-versa. Here are some adverb, conjunction groups within which the words are often confused: {adverbs: thus, therefore, hence; conjunction: so}, {adverb: however; conjunction: but}. The conjunction can often be replaced by a semi-colon followed by an adverb, for example, “but” can be replaced by “; however”, but the conjunction form is shorter and thus preferred. “Then” is an adverb, not a conjunction. With “then” you can say “and then” or better, “; then”.

9) *Citations*: capitalization and parentheses in the citation of some other part of a document. In the declaration of an entity in a paper, certain punctuation or capitalization is used. When sections, chapters, figures, etc. are declared, the word is capitalized: “Section”, etc. When equations are declared their numbers are often placed within a pair of parentheses. When items are numerically listed, the item number often has a right parenthesis or period after it. But when you cite, i.e., refer to, the entity, you should not repeat the punctuation or capitalization. Thus, it should be “in section 3” or “in equation 3” or “in item 3”, not “in Section 3”, not “in equation (3)”, and not “in item 3”.

10) *We*: It has become common in scientific writing to avoid “I” and to use “we” instead. The usage of “we” when the antecedent is singular is off-putting to numerous readers. There is nothing wrong with “I” to identify the writer in a singly-authored paper. (For example, you might write “I organize the paper as follows.”) I recommend that you only use “we” to refer to a plural antecedent.

11) *If, then*: In normal English, if the clause following “if” is not exceedingly long, you should not use “then” to begin the consequence clause.

## **Glossary**

*Declarative sentence or clause*: Most sentences or clauses are declarative. They have a subject and a predicate. Both of the previous sentences are declarative.

*Imperative sentence*: In an imperative sentence the verb is a command and has no subject (strictly it has an implied subject of “you”). Example: “Run this program using a gpu.”

*Main clause*: A sentence is made up of a single main clause or multiple clauses connected by coordinate conjunctions or semi-colons. Each clause is either declarative or imperative. Each

main clause may include relative clauses and/or subordinate clauses\*; these are respectively introduced by a relative pronoun, such as “which” or “that” or “who”, and by a subordinate conjunction, such as “because” or “since” or “whenever”.

*Predicate:* A clause consists of a subject (imperative clauses have the implied subject of “you”) and a predicate. The subject consists of a noun or pronoun and modifiers. The predicate consists of the verb and objects of the verb, as well as modifiers. In the previous sentence the subject is “The predicate”, and the predicate consists of the rest of the sentence.

*Prepositional phrase:* A prepositional phrase begins with a preposition, such as “in”, “at”, “of”, or “with”, and is followed by a noun or pronoun with modifiers. In the previous sentence “with modifiers” is a prepositional phrase.

*Relative clause:* A relative clause begins with a relative pronoun that is typically the subject or direct object of the verb in the clause, or it begins with a preposition and a relative pronoun. In the examples that follow the relative clause is underlined. “The boy who lives down the street loves to play basketball.” “The woman whom I married is pretty.” “The tool with which one drives nails is a hammer.”

*Subject:* See the glossary item, “Predicate”.

*Subordinate clause:* A subordinate clause begins with a subordinate conjunction which is followed by a subject and predicate. There is a long list of subordinate conjunctions. Common examples of subordinate conjunctions are “if”, “when” (this can also be used as a relative pronoun), “as”, “because”, “with”, and “since”. Subordinate clauses may appear at the beginning or end of a sentence or within the sentence. In the examples that follow the subordinate clause is underlined. “When I am sleeping, I often have dreams.” “I often have dreams when I am sleeping.”