

GWT Component 5: Grammar, Punctuation, and Mechanics

While effective writing is more than simply being error free, as you can see from the GWT rubric, use of correct grammar, punctuation and mechanics is still a critical component of essay evaluation. Since frequent grammar and punctuation errors can interfere with your intended meaning and diminish your credibility, it is important to do your best to eliminate errors in your GWT essay.

If you tend to make grammatical errors, be sure to allow time to proofread after you've written your essay. Be especially careful to proofread for the following kinds of errors:

- incorrect verb tense or verb forms,
- lack of agreement (singular/plural) between a subject and verb,
- omission or unnecessary use of articles (the, a, an),
- omitting plural endings (-s) or adding a plural ending to an uncountable noun,
- omitting periods (run-on or fused sentences),
- using a comma where a period or semicolon is needed (comma splice).

The University Writing Center offers grammar workshops to help students with the first four issues listed above. A schedule of workshops can be found on their website.

The following overview addresses the last two issues on correcting common sentence errors.

Sentence correctness

The sentence is a basic building block for writing, and consequently it is critical that these foundational structures be well-constructed.

As we discuss sentence structure, we will use examples based on the following GWT prompt:

In a well-organized essay, answer the following question:

In your opinion, which is more important—preserving historic buildings or encouraging modern development? Explain your position, using reasons and examples based on your own experiences, observations, or reading.

Correcting Sentence Fragments

A sentence contains a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought. A **fragment** is missing one or more of these required elements. Watch out for fragments such as

[incorrect] *Although we may not want to use an old building for its original purpose.*

Although this fragment has a subject (*we*) and a verb (*may want*), the word *although* (a subordinating conjunction) leaves the reader waiting for the thought to be completed. This fragment can be corrected two ways:

1. Omit the subordinating conjunction (*although*, *because*, *since*, *while*, *before*, etc.):

[correct] *We may not want to use an old building for its original purpose.*

2. Finish the thought by adding an independent clause (sentence) to the fragment:

[correct] *Although we may not want to use an old building for its original purpose, these historic buildings can be repaired, retrofitted, and repurposed.*

Correcting Run-on Sentences

Another frequent sentence error is the **run-on** (or **fused**) **sentence**, in which two sentences are fused together with no intervening punctuation or connectors, as in this example:

[incorrect] *Buildings with historic value can be retrofitted to meet contemporary needs while preserving historic legacy we shouldn't always build new structures.*

This is a run-on sentence because the first sentence that ends with "...*while preserving historic legacy*" runs right into the second sentence that begins with "*we shouldn't...*"

Run-on sentences can be corrected in the following ways:

1. Insert a period:

[correct] *Buildings with great historic value can be retrofitted to meet contemporary needs while preserving historic legacy. We shouldn't always build new structures.*

2. Add a semicolon:

[correct] *Buildings with great historic value can be retrofitted to meet contemporary needs while preserving historic legacy; we shouldn't always build new structures.*

3. Add a comma and a coordinating conjunction (*and*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *but*, *yet*, *so*):

[correct] *Buildings with great historic value can be retrofitted to meet contemporary needs while preserving historic legacy, so we shouldn't always build new structures.*

This third strategy for correcting a run-on sentence is often preferred because it most clearly shows the relationship between the two clauses. However, when the ideas of the two clauses are not closely related, use of a period or semicolon is expected. An effective writer will utilize all three methods when appropriate rather than selecting one method and using it throughout the entire essay.

Correcting Comma Splices

A **comma splice** happens when two sentences are incorrectly connected with only a comma:

[incorrect] *Every old building does not need to be preserved, some are not of historical importance or architectural value.*

The solutions are the same as used for the run-on sentence:

1. Insert a period:

[correct] *Every old building does not need to be preserved. Some are not of historical importance or architectural value.*

2. Add a semicolon:

[correct] *Every old building does not need to be preserved; some are not of historical importance or architectural value.*

3. Add a coordinating conjunction after the comma:

[correct] *Every old building does not need to be preserved, for some are not of historical importance or architectural value.*

And as was the case with correcting run-on sentences, this third approach to correcting comma splices is often preferred because the coordinating conjunction most explicitly shows the relationship between the two clauses; however, the writer needs to consider the connection between the ideas of the two clauses to determine if a period or semicolon is more appropriate.

Mechanics

Mechanics relate to conventions in writing, such as spelling and capitalization.

Spelling: Pay attention to commonly misspelled/misused words, such as the following:

advise (verb) vs. advice (noun)

The fire department advised the residents to evacuate due to the brush fire.

Our mayor's advice was not well received by the committee.

affect (verb) vs. effect (noun)

Even one disgruntled employee affects a work environment.

The effects of our current drought will be far-reaching and pervasive.

cite (crediting a quote/idea to someone) vs. site (location) vs. sight (seeing)

He cited an important study conducted by researchers at UCLA in 2009.

The proposed playground site had unacceptable levels of pesticide in the soil.

The sight of blood can make many people squeamish.

One of the fugitives was sighted in Orlando, Florida.

ensure (make sure) vs. insure (protect against loss)

Exorbitant late payment fees ensure that buyers will make timely payments.

This policy insures all the cars in our household against damage and theft.

it's (contraction of it is/has) vs. its (possessive form of it)

Do you know if it's rude to ask a parent to quiet his screaming toddler?
A cheetah will chase its prey using a burst of speed reaching 60 mph.

loose (not tight or confined) vs. lose (to misplace or be defeated)

The dog collar was too loose, so it was able to free itself and run away.
If we lose the game, we cannot advance in the tournament.

passed (past verb tense of pass) vs. past (a time before now, or going beyond)

We passed the same landmark three times before we realized we were lost.
In the past, cellular phones were used simply to make calls. Today, they do much more.
Some celebrities walk past their eager fans without even stopping.

than (comparing) vs. then (at or after a time)

The weather is warmer in California than in Montana.
The candidates gave their final pitch to the voters. Then, they shook hands and left the stage.

there (location) vs. their (possessive for of they) vs. they're (contraction of they are)

Residents of the neighborhood over there are tired of nightly gunshots.
Parents who hover too closely to their children are called "helicopter" parents.
College students demand to know why they're facing tuition hikes again.

Of course, this is a very short list of commonly misspelled/misused words. If you have a particularly difficult time with spelling, take the time to proofread your writing with a sharper eye for errors, especially for words that seem to trip you up frequently.

Capitalization: Most writers realize that proper nouns (names of people, places & things) require capitalization. However, some common errors occur when specific criteria are not met. A few common problematic areas include the following:

Titles and family relationships are not capitalized, but when they are used with proper nouns, they are.

The professor [title] but Professor Susan J. Horton [w/proper noun]

The queen [title] but Queen Elizabeth [w/proper noun]

His uncle [family relationship] but Uncle Joey [w/proper noun]

My dad [family relationship] but Dad [proper noun]

"My dad works at JPL." but "I'm going to ask Dad."

Subjects are not capitalized, but specific classes are:

biology [general subject] but Biology 200 [specific class]

Common nouns are not capitalized, but proper nouns are:

high school [common noun] but Augustine High School [proper noun]

university [common noun] but Stanford University [proper noun]