

Grammar for Grownups—Hit List for Evaluating Student papers

its/it's

its is the possessive of the pronoun “it”

it's is a contraction for “it is.”

NEVER use its’

Question: When is its’ correct?

Answer: **NEVER.**

you're/your

you're is a contraction for “you are.”

your is the possessive of the pronoun “you.”

they're/their/there

they're is a contraction for “they are.”

their is the possessive of the pronoun “they”

NOTE: **their** is a plural pronoun. Don't use **their** as a substitute for “his or her” or they as a substitute for “he or she.” APA style encourages gender-neutral writing. You're correct not to say “every manager has his own style,” but you can't solve the problem by saying “. . . has their own style.” You can either use “his or her” or rewrite to avoid the issue: “Every manager has a distinctive style.”

there refers to place. Example: “The police were there when he arrived.”

NOTE: Whenever possible, avoid sentences that include
“There are . . . that. . .”

Examples:

Poor: “There are many factors that contribute to the problem.”

Better: “Many factors contribute to the problem.”

who/whom

who is in the nominative case. That means we use it as the subject of a sentence or clause or to refer to the subject.

whom is in the objective case. We use it as the object of a verb or a preposition.

Example:

Jane is the person **who** gets the reports.

(Yes, that's a poor sentence; “Jane gets the reports” would be better.)

No one told us **whom** to call. We don't know to **whom** the reports go.

Note for social capital papers: “It's not what you know; it's whom you know.”

who's/whose

Same deal as those other contractions and pronouns.

than/then

Than is a comparative. Mary is taller than John.

Then refers to time. Mary spoke first, then Doug replied.

affect/effect

In most circumstances **affect** is a verb meaning “to influence.”

Example: How will that **affect** my life? If you can substitute the word “influence,” use **affect** as the verb.

effect is a noun in most cases.

Example: What **effect** will that have on my life?

Note: The only common way “effect” is used as a verb is as a synonym for “to bring about.” Example: He decided he needed to effect a change. The only way “affect” is a noun is as a psychological term. Example: The depressed patient had a flat affect. Both these are relatively rare. If you’re having trouble keeping this straight, just remember that affect is a verb, effect is a noun.

compliment/complement

Thank you for the nice compliment on our hotel’s service. I’ll see that you get a complimentary bottle of champagne in your room tonight.

The creative John and the meticulous Jane complemented each other’s skills.

role/roll

The drama teacher called the roll before she assigned roles in the play. She served cinnamon rolls for breakfast.

moral/morale

The morale of Enron’s employees was very low when they discovered that the company’s actions had not been moral.

stationery/stationary

stationEry—lEtter

stationary—plAce

criteria/criterion

Of all the criteria for grading, the most important criterion is class participation.

farther/further

As Sarah walked farther down the road, she delved further into her reasons for making the decision.

comprise/compose

Comprise is a transitive verb. That means it must have a direct object.

Wrong: The U.S. is comprised of 50 states.

Correct: The U.S. comprises 50 states.

Correct: The U.S. is composed of 50 states.

Straightforward writing

passive voice

Verbs are strong, direct communicators. Avoid the passive voice whenever possible.

Example:

Poor: The report was written by the ad hoc committee.

Better: The ad hoc committee wrote the report.

The only time the passive is the best choice is when the agent is not really the point: “The organ was tuned just before the recital.”

Using “**there are . . .that**” often sets up needless passive voice and a meandering, wordy sentence.

Poor: There are many companies that have had to restate their earnings.

Better: Many companies have had to restate their earnings.

Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

Unclear: As a new customer, we have decided to give you. . .”

Clear: Because you are a new customer, we have decided. . .

Of course, we often count on these dangling modifiers to provide diversion from an evening of reading papers: “After running down the block in high heels, the bus left without me.”

Many students get into trouble with misplaced modifiers because they use the passive voice.

“After studying the situation, the cows were identified as giving milk with high butterfat content.”

Impact is NOT a verb, even though one sees it used that way twelve times a day. (Substitute the verb “affect”: “We want to see how this affects the situation,” or “We want to see what impact this has on the situation.”)

Quality is NOT an adjective, even though Franklin incorrectly uses it that way in its guiding principles statement. So, don’t say you want to produce a quality product. Say you want to produce a good quality product, or an excellent product.

Noun-pronoun agreement in referring to businesses:

Though businesses include many people, a business’s name is singular.

Rather than “The FDA regulates according to their own criteria,” say “The FDA regulates according to its own criteria.” Think beehive or anthill. It’s a singular noun describing an entity with many constituent parts.

as such

This is used incorrectly so often, one is wise to avoid it altogether. Besides, it can be stilted.

As such refers to nouns or labels, not situations.

Wrong: John is in the reserves. As such, he may be called to active duty.

Correct: John is a reservist; as such, he may be called to active duty.

only

Place **only** next to the word or phrase it modifies.

Wrong: Fred and Eustace only ate the dessert. (Unless you're trying to imply that they didn't also throw it at each other or smear it on their clothes.)

Correct: Fred and Eustace ate only the dessert.

Obtain, assist, endeavor, and similar “important sounding” words

Stick with straightforward words like get, help, and try.

Many students want to “assist in the development of” when they could “help develop.”

*Take the **anti-utilize** pledge. See how long you can go without using the word “utilize” in your papers.*

Use of second person (your)

Second person is a good choice for direct address or instructions.

When you see the sign, turn left.

It's not the best choice for academic and professional writing.

Poor: You can always tell when . . .

Better: One can always tell when

The Ohio participle (a grammatical error that is documented only in Ohio, Western Pennsylvania, and Northern Kentucky)

Wrong: The room needs painted.

Correct: The room needs to be painted.

forming the plural—NEVER form the plural by adding 's

Examples: We surveyed the employees. We turned on the radios. We visited the countries. We fired the managers.

Side note: The plural of a proper name is formed just as the plural of a common noun. Add s (or es, in some cases).

Examples: The Joneses went to the fair. The Lentzes traveled to Europe. The Smiths stayed at home. If you have “The Johnson’s” on your mailbox, go outside and scratch out the apostrophe.

possessive—singular and plural

Singular possessive: add apostrophe, then s.

For words that end in s or an s sound, add apostrophe, then s, just as usual (except for Jesus’ and Moses’). For example, The business’s goal was to make money.

Plural possessive. First make the word plural, then add apostrophe.

The businesses’ goals (meaning the goals of several businesses) were to make more money.

Use a **semicolon** to separate two independent clauses that are not joined by a conjunction, or to separate elements in a series that already contains commas.

Lori was always early for class; Alphonse was always late. (no conjunction, so you need a semicolon)

Anne-Marie always did her homework, but Eudora never read the assignment. (conjunction, so you can use a comma)

You would need the semicolon only if you were separating series that contained commas within. For example, “We could choose the pastels, pink, aqua, or baby blue; the vivid colors, red, green, and navy; or the earth tones, mauve, amber, and sand.”

In American usage, as opposed to British, the comma and period always go inside the quotation marks. Colons and semicolons are always outside. Placing question marks and exclamation points depends on the sense of the sentence.

Redundant Expressions and Cliches:

While at the same time [while means “at the same time”]

Each and every [pick one]

Refer back or Return back [“back” is understood in the meaning of both “refer” and “return.”]

Future prognosis [a “prognosis” predicts the future.

Successfully graduate [how could one “unsuccessfully graduate”? If you mean to graduate by a certain time or with a certain grade average, just say that.]

In conclusion—This is more appropriate for a speech. We tell the students just to conclude. If we can’t discern that we’re reading a conclusion, we’ve got other problems.

And speaking of introductions and conclusions . . .

An introduction should state the main points of the paper or raise the main question the paper intends to address.

An introduction is not a table of contents in narrative form. A conclusion summarizes the point of the paper. It doesn’t list its sections:

Poor Introduction: First I will do A. Then I will do B. Then I will do C. Finally, I will summarize by telling you I’ve done A, B, and C.

Poor conclusion: In this paper I have done A. Then I said B. Then I said C. Finally, I . . .

Avoid clichés like these:

. . . in this rapidly changing global economy . . .

. . . out-of-the-box thinking . . .

. . . in the ever-changing business world . . .

. . . in the new millennium and beyond . . .

APA Style

APA style uses commas after every item in a series, even before the “and.”

The flag was red, white, and blue.

APA style requires **gender neutral expressions**. Alas, this often gets students into difficulties with noun-pronoun agreement, since one can’t use a plural pronoun to refer to a singular noun.

Wrong: Each manager has their own way of doing things.

Not preferred: Each manager has his own way of doing things.

Not preferred: Each manager has his/her own way of doing things.

Correct: All managers have their own way of doing things.

Correct: Each manager has a distinctive way of doing things.

The first time you use an **abbreviation** that is not in general use, spell it out, followed by the abbreviation in parentheses. In subsequent uses, you may use the abbreviation alone.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) keeps statistics on car crashes. Last year, the NTSB reported that . . .

Use a colon after an introduction that is a complete sentence.

Never use a colon after words like “by,” “for,” “such as,” “including,” or “are.”

Use a comma to separate the independent clauses of a compound sentence. A clause is independent if it could stand on its own as a complete sentence.

I went to the party, and I danced all night. (Compound sentence use a comma.)

I went to the party and danced all night. (Compound verb—no comma needed)

Miscellaneous

from 9 a.m. to noon. OR 9 a.m. – noon. NOT “from 9 a.m. – noon.”

Note APA format is a.m. and p.m., lowercase letters.

Bullet points get nary a mention in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, but they are the very lifeblood of a business school: Here’s the adaptation:

Several rabbits inhabited Farmer McGregor’s cabbage patch:

- Flopsie
- Mopsie
- Cottontail
- Peter

The rabbits who inhabited the cabbage patch were

- Flopsie
- Mopsie
- Cottontail
- Peter

Notice there’s no colon after “were” in the second example. Colons follow complete sentences. Notice also, the bulleted items don’t end with periods, because they’re not complete sentences.

APA style doesn’t use colons after words like “by,” “from,” “such as,” or “including” before a series.