Mastering Grammar to Reduce Errors

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Organization
Location

Month XX, 20XX

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**Miles Miniaci,
Instructor**

Course Description

This intensive one-day course focuses on best practices for science-based professional writing, with an emphasis on sentence-level considerations. Rather than simply reviewing "grammar rules," this course explores grammar as a valuable tool for clear communication and reviews the best sentence-level practices to help support your overall content and structure.

Topics covered include controlling sentence length, breaking up overly long introductory phrases and "noun chains," populating prose with human subjects, emphasizing active voice and vivid verbs, most effectively using various sentence combining strategies and transitional words/phrases, applying sentence models to best integrate outside data and/or quoted material, and employing parallel structure to make list items clearer.

Instructor Bio

Miles Miniaci is a professor of Upper Division Writing at the University of California, Davis, specializing in Writing in the Professions courses, which include specialized pre-professional courses such as Writing in Science Professions, Writing in Health Professions, Writing in Elementary and Secondary Education, Business Writing, and Technical Writing. Miles has also taught Composition at California State University, Sacramento and Sacramento City College. He also taught Workplace Writing Skills for the Federal Job Corps Program, working with a variety of professional organizations and vocational training programs.

In addition to his teaching experience, Miles has also worked as a Copy Writer and Marketing Specialist for the California Department of Conservation (Division of Recycling), and as a grant writer and consultant for the non-profit organization California Alliance for Arts Education.

Miles received his MFA from the University of Southern California, his BA from California State University, Sacramento, and his teaching credential from National University.

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Grammar for Avoiding Error

Microsoft recently released a list of the most common grammar errors in English, compiled from millions of Word and Outlook users' data, and the following were among the most commonly recurring patterns of error.

(http://www.businessinsider.com/microsoft-data-the-most-common-grammar-mistakes-2017-3)

- Unclear Pronoun Reference

- Subject-Verb Agreement and Verb Tense Issues

- Parallel Structure

- Dangling or Misplaced Modifiers

- Misplaced or Missing Commas

- Misplaced or Missing Semi-Colons

- Run-On Sentences and Comma Splices

- Sentence Fragments

- Incorrect Possessive Nouns and Plurals

- Date and Number Use Errors / Typos

Notes: What common patterns of error, if any, do you think could be added to this list? Are there any that are particularly common in Water Boards writing?

Unclear Pronoun Reference

Pronoun use is a key component of plain language. However, this means writers must be sure their pronouns clearly refer to specific antecedents (previous nouns or noun phrases). Another common cause of pronoun error is the pronoun "who" or "whom," which varies depending whether the antecedent is a subject or an object of the sentence.

Correct the following passages for correct pronoun use, or where blank spaces are used, provide the correct form of "who" or "whom."

Lasers have also been used to study the reaction by which nitric oxide and ozone make nitrogen dioxide (NO2) and molecular oxygen. It plays an important role in the chemistry of the ozone layer that surrounds the earth and protects us from the sun's harmful ultraviolet radiation.

Without mechanical incorporation, the herbicide evaporates, which results in poor weed control.

The movement and distribution of Sacramento River smolt were similar to that of juveniles found elsewhere.

The State Water Board has just announced their February data on statewide water savings.

Currently, California has $409 million in their 2016-2017 budget to help fund a new form of mass transportation.

If you receive an email titled "Win a Holiday," do <u>not</u> open it. It will erase everything on your hard drive. Forward this email to as many people as you can. This is a very malicious virus and few people know about it yet.

It was the SWRCB engineers _____ Sen. Eagleton's office contacted on July 17.

It was the SWRCB engineers _____ performed the tests on the walkways.

Send a copy of the report to _____ever wants one.

No one is sure _____ will be the next mayor.

Subject-Verb Agreement and Parallel Structure

Another key component of plain language is beginning sentences when possible with the main clause before adding further details including serial lists. In these cases, it is still crucial that subjects and verbs agree in terms of number and verb tense, and that serial list items are parallel in form.

Review the first set of passages for subject-verb agreement; review the second set of passages for parallel structure issues.

```
The criteria for assessing the environmental effects of acid
rain is given in the next section.

So far, the daily number of engineers applying have remained
constant.

A mixture of materials were used to withstand high temperatures.

The variety of materials tested was sufficient for comparative
analysis.

Each flask and each holder was sterilized before use.

One-fourth of the electrons was excited.

One-third of the precipitate were dissolved.
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```
The objectives were to assess the extent of damage, identify the
causes of the problem, and recommending stabilization measures.

An important consideration is performance standards and how to
select measurable targets.

Cyanobacteria blooms are undesirable because they are expensive
to mitigate, because they create unpleasant odors, and because
they kill fish.
```

Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers

Be sure that all modifying words and phrases are clearly connected to the words and ideas they modify. In some cases, this may require changing the order of sentence parts; in others, separate sentences may be necessary.

The company nearly spent a hundred hours investigating the accident.

Having damaged the previous one, a new sensor was installed in the monitoring equipment.

Using the survey data, the uses of municipal recycled water were examined.

The supervisor said after the initial planning the in-depth study would begin.

Using a grant from the Urban Mass Transportation Administration, a contraflow lane was designed for I-45 North.

The Task Force revealed potential long term benefits of a nitrogen mass balance tracking system that were unexpected.

By using approved desalination processes, it may allow the state to gain greater water security while protecting the coastal marine environment.

Whether the facility can avoid formal enforcement actions would require the corrective actions detailed in the Documentation of Corrective Actions and the Revised Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP) to be determined sufficient.

Pointing out the statewide conservation rates, water saving measures have become much more common across California, according to the State Water Board spokeswoman.

I tried calling to tell you about the grant announcement five times.

Sentence Types

1. What is an independent clause (IC)?

   _____

   Give an example.

   _____

2. What is a dependent clause (DC)?

   _____

   Give an example.

   _____

3. What is a **compound sentence**?

   _____

   Give an example.

   _____

4. What is a **complex sentence**?

   _____

   _____

   Give an example.

   _____

5. What are the 7 **coordinating conjunctions** (cc)?

   _____

Sentence Types, cont'd.

Name that sentence type:

IC. _____

IC, cc IC. _____

DC, IC. _____

IC DC. _____

DC, IC, cc IC. _____

Sentence Types and Punctuation

Using the models above, decide what punctuation and conjunctions may be necessary in each sentence. Boxes are for punctuation, and blank spaces are for conjunctions. Strike through any boxes or blank spaces you do not need to use. (Some passages may have more than one correct combination of transition words and/or punctuation.)

While early regulatory efforts focused on controlling pollutants□ _____ current efforts emphasize implementing best management practices.

Current efforts emphasize implementing best management practices _____ while early regulatory efforts focused on controlling pollutants.

Early regulatory efforts focused on controlling pollutants _____ current efforts emphasize implementing best management practices.

Early regulatory efforts focused on controlling pollutants _____ current efforts emphasize implementing best management practices.

While early regulatory efforts focused on controlling pollutants _____ current efforts emphasize implementing best management _____ practices newer development techniques are capturing storm water runoff for local irrigation.

Common Uses of Commas

Apply the rules of common comma usage to correct punctuation in the following sentences.

We conducted the study from May 15 2005 to July 1 2009.

Fortunately staff contained the spill quickly.

The package included the meter instructions and extra sample strips.

The letters were mailed on Monday February 1, 2011 to interested parties.

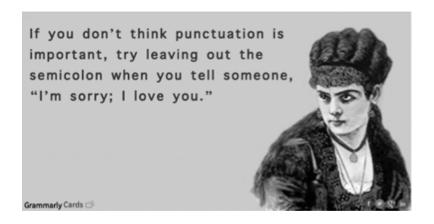We will consider all public comments even if they arrive late.

In our study, we examined neat methanol, neat ethanol, methanol and 10% water and ethanol and 10% water.

Occasionally a rainstorm will cause severe bank erosion.

Farmers, business owners, and council members, all had the same concern.

After cooling the exhaust gases continue to expand.

Your September 5 2014 letter stated your intent to commence construction at the designated site.

If you don't think punctuation is important, try leaving out the semicolon when you tell someone, "I'm sorry; I love you."

Grammarly Cards

Avoiding Comma Overuse

Whether a sentence part is essential or non-essential can sometimes be difficult to determine; this can often lead to comma overuse. Such overuse, in turn, can sometimes confuse or change a sentence's meaning.

Decide whether commas should be used around the following sentence parts.

It can be assumed that [,] precipitation particles move with the air in their environment and are therefore good tracers for air motion.

The test produced a speed in the high-pressure hydrogen turbopump of 7000 rom [,] which is 19 percent of design speed.

A turbopump is a pump [,] that is turned by the action of a turbine that shares a common shaft with the pump.

Decreasing the radar operating frequency [,] increases the effective velocity coverage for the same sampling rate.

The Coriolis force [,] caused by the rotation of the earth, always acts at right angles to the pressure gradient in the northern hemisphere.

The separator between black mix and the zinc electrode [,] consists of a paper barrier coated with cereal or methyl cellulose.

The formation of hurricane [,] a type of atmospheric vortex, involves the combined effect of pressure and circular wind.

A drop of water almost flattens out [,] when it is placed on a glass plate.

Detergent materials added to liquids decrease the contact angle [,] thereby decreasing the wettability.

When waterproofing material is added to a fabric [,] it increases the contact angle and makes the fabric water-repellent.

Semicolons vs. Colons

Phrase or clause + comma + sentence

In our sediment study, we examined all toxicity data in the SWAMP database.

Sentence + semicolon + sentence

Technology has made our lives easier; it has also made them more complicated.

Sentence + colon + list, definition, or example

This report focuses on stressors: physical, chemical, or biological variables that can induce an adverse response in a biological community.

We had planned to attend the meeting, however, we needed to meet a deadline on another project.

The participants agreed to a compromise, the vote was unanimous.

The position requires: one year in California state service, two years of professional engineering geological experience, and one year of actual detailed field study.

Reduce groundwater usage by the following procedures, identifying unconstitutional waste, identifying unreasonable use, and implementing plans to correct problems.

The Central Valley has an arid climate, however it supports abundant grasslands.

If stressors cannot be directly remedied by management actions, they are typically not considered "controllable."

Avoiding Run-Ons and Comma Splices

Note: You may wish to first review sentence types and sentence combining on pgs. 9 - 10.

Run-ons are two sentences (or independent clauses) combined without any punctuation; comma splices are two sentences (or independent clauses) combined with just a comma: Remember, to combine two sentences, one must have either:

- a comma <u>and a conjunction</u>
- a semi-colon

   (Semi-colons should only be used to join sentences that are already very close in meaning; even then, transition words may still be needed after the semi-colon to show the relationship between the sentence.)

Use either method of sentence combining, or use a period and separate sentences, to address the issues in the following passages.

```
This report presents the data we found concerning the cost of
the water treatment project, then it presents comparative data
from other similar projects.

Adherence ranges from 10-30% for simple interventions, more
intensive interventions result in higher rates of up to 50%.

Most of this firm's contracts have been with industrial sites,
included among them is Rockhead and Quarry Construction in
Milpitas.

The opposite is true of stronger types of stainless steel,
they tend to be more susceptible to rust.

The slide rule was an important device for scientists and
engineers for many years; although its use has all but vanished
since the advent of the pocket calculator.
```

(/-‘,!:?)

Avoiding Fragments

Fragments are non-essential sentence parts that cannot stand alone as a sentence because they lack a subject, verb, or complete thought. These sentence parts can be dependent clauses (*see pg. 9*), or non-essential phrases (*See pg. 12*). A frequent cause of fragments is a sentence part separated from its main sentence with a period or semi-colon, instead of with a comma or no punctuation.

Some basic rules of punctuating sentence parts are:

- Sentence (IC) $\boxed{;}$ **or** $\boxed{.}$ sentence (IC)
- Sentence (IC) $\boxed{\textbf{, cc}}$ sentence (IC)

- Sentence part (DC) $\boxed{,}$ sentence (IC)
- Sentence (IC) $\boxed{,}$ **or** $\boxed{}$ sentence part (DC)

Correct fragment errors in the following passages.

Mary appeared at the committee meeting last week. And made a convincing presentation of her ideas about the new product.

Staff finds this an interesting and timely comment. Since brackish waters may not be considered a source due to their salinity.

The proposal must include a number of sections. For example, a discussion of personnel and their qualifications, expectations concerning the schedule of the project, and a cost breakdown.

The program has reorganized the workload. Making sure that partnering groups in areas of their own expertise and that each agency is assigned an appropriate number of tasks and goals.

She spent a month evaluating his computer-based site visit data. Which she eventually sent to her supervisor with the strongest of recommendations.

The State Water Board has developed the following marketing plan to increase awareness of SRF Programs. Although not every marketing tactic will be effective with each of their target audiences.

Types of Joining Words

Different types of joining words are used to combine sentences and sentence parts in different ways. Using these different joining words selectively helps avoid common errors like run-ons, comma splices, and fragments, and also helps increase sentence variety.

FANBOYS (or *Coordinating Conjunctions*)

For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So

FANBOYS are used with a comma to join two or more sentences (*See pg. 9*).

- Sentence (IC) **, cc** sentence (IC)

Dependent Words (or *Subordinating Conjunctions*)

After, Although, As, As long as, As soon as, Because, Before, Even though, If, Once, Rather than, Since, Supposing, Unless, Until, When, Whether, While

Dependent words make a clause dependent (*see pg. 9*). Dependent clauses are followed with a comma if they are at the beginning or in the middle of the sentence, or with no comma if the dependent clause is at the end of the sentence...unless the DC is negative or shows contrast.

- **Dependent word** + clause (DC) **,** sentence (IC)
- Sentence (IC) ☐ **dependent word** + clause (DC)

Transition Words/Phrases (or *Conjunctive Adverbs*)

Accordingly, Also, As a result, Consequently, For example, Furthermore, However, Instead, In addition, In fact, In other words, Moreover, Nevertheless, Otherwise, On the other hand, On the contrary, Still, Therefore, Thus

Transition words or phrases are used to begin a sentence. They can be the first word in the sentence, or if two sentences are joined with a semi-colon, they can follow the semi-colon. Transition words/phrases are usually followed by a comma.

- **Transition word** **,** sentence (IC)
- Sentence (IC) **;** **transition word** **,** sentence (IC)

Types of Joining Words, cont'd.

Using the rules and examples provided, insert the correct transition words and punctuation in each passage. Blank spaces are for transition words, and boxes are for punctuation.

Some passages may have more than one correct combination of transition words and/or punctuation.

```
Construction activity subject to this permit includes clearing
and grading, _____ it does not include regular maintenance
activities.

_____ the SWRCB does not need to approve such changes   an
important safeguard does not exist.

This SWRCB program has suffered from lack of funding since 2000
_____   California Department of Fish and Wildlife has been
collecting and analyzing mussel samples from a limited number of
sites

The responsibility for California's operator certification
program has been transferred to the State Water Board. _____
no changes were made to the operator certification program
statutes or regulations.

Pre-1914 water rights holders may make changes without
petitioning the SWRCB   _____  they must still ensure that the
change does not injure other legal users.
```

Note: There are many other Dependent Words and Transition Words then are listed here. For a fuller list and additional examples, there are many useful online resources, for example:

https://webapps.towson.edu/ows/conjunctions.htm

Other Punctuation

Apostrophes

Use an apostrophe to indicate possession. Do not use an apostrophe simply to indicate plural items, even if they are numbers or abbreviations: 2000s, WRCEs.

The basic rules of apostrophe usage are:

- Singular words not ending in 's' = add 's
- Singular words ending in 's' = add 's

- Plural words ending in 's' = add '
- Plural words not ending in 's' = add 's

Quotation Marks

Periods and commas <u>always</u> come before the closing quotation mark; however, other punctuation marks <u>added</u> to the original quote come after the closing quotation mark.

Use single quotation marks only to signify a quotation within a quotation.

<u>Correct any errors in apostrophe or quotation mark use.</u>

```
The dischargers reports are here.

EIR's disclose the environmental impacts of a project.

This letter addresses your question "How long will the permit
process take"?

The Board appreciates Mr. Jones comments.

According to the study, There is a direct correlation between an
area's imperviousness and the degradation of beneficial uses of
downstream watercourses.

These companies' employees' partner address a variety of
questions related to basin monitoring.
```

Possessives

Each space in the paragraph below is preceded by an "opportunity for error" in the formation of plurals or possessives. If the word is correct, write a 'C' in the space; if it is incorrect, write an 'I'.

My friend's ☐, the Rodriguez's ☐, had a big family reunion last summer. They hadn't been together since the late 1980's ☐, according to Carmen, and there were many cousins ☐she hadn't seen since then and some new baby's ☐she'd never met before. "Aunt Flo ☐and Uncle Silvio's ☐family had really grown," she said. Flo, who already had five kids of her own, had divorced and remarried and Flo's ☐ and Silvio's ☐kids -- like a bunch of elves ☐-- filled a minivan and two taxis ☐. Fortunately, Flo and Silvio have PhD's ☐in psychology with good incomes to match. "We should've leased busses ☐for everyone," Carmen added.

They had their big dinner down at that place owned by Joe Pagani, Paganis ☐Ristorante, Illinois's ☐most popular and expensive restaurant. It was jammed and familys ☐kept arriving in bunch's ☐until some people ended up sitting on box's ☐and benches ☐. The waitresses ☐went crazy keeping up with the order's ☐, especially with kids ordering from the childrens' ☐menu. When it came time to pay the bill, they couldn't find Agnes's ☐purse, and she had collected all the money. They had a lot of laughs ☐about washing all those dish's ☐until Uncle Antony found his baby girl, Eutrusca, curled up under his chair, sound asleep, using Agneses' ☐bag for a pillow. Eutrusca hadn't waited for her grandpas ☐long after-dinner speech to put her to sleep.

Possessive Pronouns

> your, yours, you're, its, it's, whose, who's, their, theirs, there's

Underline the correct possessive pronoun or contraction.

1. (Who, Whose, Who's) going to fix this horrible mess?
2. During (their, theirs, there's) party, Sam and Janet danced the tango.
3. Do you know (who, whose, who's) candy this is?
4. If (your, yours, you're) not careful, the ink will spill.
5. Is that rude child (your, yours, you're)?
6. Give me (your, yours, you're) attention.
7. (Its, It's) plain to see why she likes him.
8. (Their, Theirs, There's) really no reason to go outside now.
9. That is a nice statue; I like (its, it's) pose.
10. Some cousins of (their, theirs, there's) are coming to visit.

Don't let possessive pronouns and gerunds confuse you.

- She can't take him complaining all the time.
- She can't take **his** complain**ing** all the time.

What can't she take, "him" or "complaining"? The second sentence uses a possessive pronoun so we know that it is the "complaining" that she can't take.

Another confusing possessive pronoun is "one's." This is the only possessive pronoun that has an apostrophe.

Underline the correct word in each sentence.

1. My son did his homework without (me, my) asking him.
2. It is good manners to ask (ones, one's) permission.
3. (Your, You) winning the game was great.
4. I loved (they, their) singing.
5. Those jokes are the really funny (ones, one's).

Dates and Numbers

- Spell out most numbers from zero to ten. Use numerals for 11 and above. If you have both in the same sentence or discussion, use numerals for all.

- Write dates as numerals, without the additional th, nd, or rd.

- Do not insert a numeral in parentheses after a spelled-out number.

- Use numerals for figures that have technical significance, such as percentages, measurements, ages, money, units of measurement, and statistical data: 8 percent, 5-year plan.

- Use the word "percent" with a number, and the word "percentage" without a number. Write out "percent" in sentences and paragraphs; use the "%" symbol in charts and tables.

Revise these sentences for number use, spelling out numbers or changing them to numerals where appropriate.

A full 3/4 (75 percent) of the experimental animals died with 15 hours, but 17 horses (10%) were still alive forty-five days later.

Of those sixty (60) notices, we have information on 70 percent of the matters. Eighteen (18) matters settled. An additional twenty-one (21) matters were in active negotiation or litigation. Three (3) notices are not being pursued.

The test plot contained ten species of grasses, two species of legumes, six species of trees, and 15 species of cruciferous plants.

"Run the numbers, then crunch them just to be sure."

Appendix One: Commonly Misused Words and Phrases

This list comprises information from web-based sources such as Microsoft, StyleWriter, and Scribendi, as well as training-based sources such as *Business Insider* and *Harvard Business Review*. According to these sources, the following 20 words and phrases are the most commonly misused in professional writing.

Advice / Advise

Affect / Effect

All right / Alright

A lot / Allot / Alot

Assure / Ensure / Insure

Between / Among

Compliment / Complement

Farther / Further

I / Me / Myself

Irregardless / Regardless

Lay / Lie

Less / Fewer

Lets / Let's

Principle / Principal

Their / There / They're

To / Too

That / Which /Who

Whose / Who's

Years / Years' experience

You're / Your

Notes: What commonly misused words or phrases do you think could be added to this list? Are there any particularly common to Water Boards writing?

Appendix Two: Plain Writing Checklist

Adapted from National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Style Guide

Is the tone appropriate for the audience? Did you...	Yes	No
Write for the reader (average reader or subject matter expert)?	☐	☐

Are ideas organized logically? Did you...	Yes	No
Start with the main point?	☐	☐
Organize to serve the reader's needs?	☐	☐

Is the document formatted for readability? Did you...	Yes	No
Use informative headings and subheadings a lengthy document?	☐	☐
Use white space for easy scanning?	☐	☐
Use lists and tables to simplify complex material?	☐	☐

Does the document use the right words? Did you...	Yes	No
Use active voice?	☐	☐
Use the simplest tense possible (present tense is best)?	☐	☐
Use "must" to express requirements and avoid the use of "shall"?	☐	☐
Use everyday words (consider the audience)?	☐	☐
Use pronouns ("we" and "you") to speak to the reader?	☐	☐
Omit unnecessary words?	☐	☐
Use short sentences?	☐	☐
Place words carefully?	☐	☐

Are the spelling and grammar correct? Did you...	Yes	No
Spell and capitalize words correctly?	☐	☐
Make subjects and verbs agree?	☐	☐
Use correct punctuation?	☐	☐

Additional Practice

The following passage contains a number of errors in wording, grammar, and punctuation. Practice editing the passage for these sentence-level issues.

This study investigated the relationships among stress, personality type, anger and chronic disease. Two of the four hypotheses, discussed previously, were found to be true. Consistent with the work of Garon and Mantel (2003), the correlation between stress level and disease was very significant. However, its worth noting that the affect of personality type was statistically insignificant. The lack of relationship between personality and chronic disease is inconsistent with previous studies (Harrison et al., 2006; Davis, Wolf and Jones, 2004). The ANOVA that compares high- and low-anger participants yielded the most significant finding (p = .001). The data was consistent with previous research showing that anger effected stress level (Harrison, Holstein, Calf, Grobeck, & Nelson, 2006). Higher levels of reported anger were associated with significantly less stress. These findings have important implications for health psychologists. Facilitating a person's expression of anger can reduce stress and lower their risk for disease.

Two of the desired inclusion criterion for the participant sample were not met. The vast majority of subjects were Caucasian. Orientals, Mexican-Americans, and blacks accounted for only 9% of the sample. Also, there were too few female participants; there were twenty-five women and two hundred men. Thus, the data could not be used to examine whether gender or ethnicity impacted risk for disease.

This study extends the work of Parlick & Wilson (2007) whose research the American Psychosomatic Society (as cited in Parlick & Wilson, 2007) recently honored as "cutting edge in the field". They argue, "The progress made in late 20th century stress research has exceeded expectations. Our rapidly growing understanding of psychological factors, in the development and treatment of chronic disease, has set the stage for major breakthroughs in health psychology (p. 195)."