

TROUBLE SPOTS: COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

THESIS STATEMENT/SUPPORTING CLAIMS/PARAGRAPH DEVELOPMENT/CONCLUSION. A *thesis* forecasts the development of the paper. *Supporting claims* refer back to the thesis and serve as *topic sentences* for paragraphs. In a formal paper, each paragraph should have a central idea and at least several sentences of development.

In 1941, the attack on Pearl Harbor shocked and angered us; in 1929, the stock market crash deeply wounded us and brought on the Great Depression, but mainland America has never experienced a day as tragic and terrifying as the day when commercial airliners were flown into the World Trade Center towers and the U.S. Pentagon. In truth, September 11, 2001, was the day that sobered America.

On that fall Tuesday, most of us woke and went to work as usual, carefree citizens who felt protected by our armed forces, the best equipped and trained in the world (Jones 12). Terrorism had briefly touched us twice before when. . . , but we had shrugged our shoulders and forgotten about it. Then, the news reports began to tell of a United Airlines flight that . . .

The instant loss of life and property made us realize that we are vulnerable to attack by deadly enemies who wish to destroy us. The words “Al Qaida” soon became familiar. . .

The tangled wreckage and mangled bodies silenced our mirth and tainted our trust. As weeks of rescue operations continued, we realized that we are no longer safe within our borders. Government officials immediately tightened security measures at airports, train stations, and government buildings (Smith 15). . .

The cell phone calls from passengers aboard the fourth plane that crashed in Pennsylvania show us the courage and self-sacrifice that we will need to defeat these enemies. Todd Beamer, Tom Burnett, Mark Bingham, and others fought bravely to thwart the plans of the enemy, sacrificing their own lives for others (“Heroes: Flight 93”). We, too, must be willing to submit to security measures designed to protect us from those who hate America and its freedoms.

Obviously, the future is unsure, but we do know that we must never allow ourselves to be lulled back into a false sense of security. Now that we have been awakened to the danger of attack, we must be ever vigilant to watch, to search, to question. We must be willing to sacrifice to protect ourselves and our way of life, or else we may lose more lives and property.

PARAGRAPHS. Each paragraph should have a **central idea** and at least several sentences of development. Many readers expect a **clear topic sentence** (see underlined sentence below) at the beginning of each paragraph in some types of formal papers. Topic sentences should either support a thesis or pick up an idea from the previous paragraph. Informal or creative writing is less stringent.

Most kinds of insects have two large compound eyes that occupy most of the head. Each eye is made up of tiny, six-sided lenses that fit together like the cells of a honeycomb. The number of lenses varies from about 6 in some worker ants to about 30,000 in some dragonflies. Each lens admits a small part of the total scene that the insect sees. All the parts together combine and form the whole picture. (Excerpt from the World Book Encyclopedia, 2002 ed.)

TRANSITIONS. Words and phrases can be used within and between paragraphs to connect ideas and to signal new ideas.

What started as a delicious dinner for newlyweds became a joke to tell my future children. First, I found a great recipe for lasagna, bought all the ingredients, and layered them in the pan; then, I made garlic bread with parmesan cheese. Since I wanted to keep the food hot until my husband came home, I put the food in the oven on the lowest temperature. Unfortunately, I left the room to wash some laundry and did not notice that my cat jumped on the stove and rubbed against the oven knob so that it moved to 550 degrees. When I smelled smoke, I ran into the room and found black smoke pouring from the oven door. Needless to say, only the garbage disposal ate well that night.

Addition	or, nor, and, and then, moreover, besides, further, furthermore, likewise, also, too, again, in addition, even more important, next first, second, third, finally, last, additionally, incidentally, otherwise
Comparison	similarly, likewise
Contrast	but, yet, or, and yet, however, still, instead, nevertheless, on the other hand, on the contrary, conversely, even so, notwithstanding, in contrast, at the same time, although this may be true, otherwise, nonetheless
Place	here, beyond, nearby, opposite to, adjacent to, on the opposite side
Purpose	for this purpose, in order to, with this object, to this end
Cause/effect, result	so, for, therefore, accordingly, consequently, thus, as a result, then, because, hence, if...then, hence
Summary	in brief, on the whole, in sum, in short, to sum up, in conclusion, to conclude, finally, in closing, in other words, therefore, to close, to summarize
Repetition	in other words, to be sure, as has been noted, to emphasize
Exemplification	for example, for instance, another example is, in fact, in particular, specifically, to illustrate this point,
Intensification	in fact, indeed, to emphasize, decidedly, obviously, certainly, definitely
Time	meanwhile, at length, soon, afterward, after, in the meantime, later, now, then, in the past, while, at last, during, earlier, thereafter, immediately

PUNCTUATION. There are six basic sentence patterns (~ stands for a word, phrase, or dependent clause). Create a sentence for each pattern:

1. Simple sentence = SVC.
2. Compound sentence =
 - a. SVC, and SVC. (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet)
 - b. SVC; SVC.
3. Introductory word, phrase or clause = ~, SVC.
4. Non-essential, interrupting word, phrase, or clause = S, ~, VC.
5. Necessary phrase or clause =
 - a. S ~VC.
 - b. SVC ~.
6. Additional phrase or clause =
 - a. SVC, ~.
 - b. SVC: ~.
 - c. SVC-- ~.

FLOW. Combine short sentences to avoid chopiness.

Problem: My car needs repairs. The transmission is broken. The brakes are bad. The muffler makes noise.

Revision: My car needs a new transmission, brakes, and muffler.

SENTENCE FRAGMENT. A sentence fragment is a dependent clause or phrase that cannot stand alone (. Often, fragments may be joined to the previous or following sentence. Notice the following sentence and underlined fragment.

Problem: Martin Luther King Jr. was a Baptist minister. Who organized non-violent protest marches for the Civil Rights Movement.

Revision: Martin Luther King Jr. was a Baptist minister who organized non-violent protest marches for the Civil Rights Movement.

PRONOUN/ANTECEDENT AGREEMENT. Pronouns must agree in number with the noun to which they refer (referent). A singular pronoun (her) should be used to refer to a singular noun (anyone, someone). Some writers use "his/her;" others alternate the pronouns, using "her" in one sentence and "his" in the next. **Often, the plural form is preferable to avoid the gender problem.** In the following examples, the pronouns and the antecedents to which they refer are underlined.

Problem: Did everyone submit their paper?

Revision: Did everyone hand in her paper?

Almost no one hesitated to assert his power.

Plural: Students should submit their papers by Friday.

PASSIVE VOICE. The active voice is often preferable to the passive because the subject of the action is clear. However, some disciplines such as the hard sciences wish to emphasize the object, so it is placed first in the sentence. Use the passive when the subject (actor) is not important to the meaning of the sentence.

Passive: Most papers were submitted on time by the students.

Active: Most students submitted their papers on time.

Subject not important: The beaker was heated to boiling; the temperature was maintained for 5 minutes.

TENSE. The simple past tense is usually preferable.

Problem: He would bite his nails all the time.

Revision: He always bit his nails.

PARALLEL STRUCTURE. Items in lists should be similar grammatical elements (all nouns, all verbs, etc.)

Problem: I like track, football, and playing baseball.

Revision: I like track, football, and baseball.

Problem: She eats healthy meals, would exercise regularly, daily brushing her teeth and flossing, and weekly visiting her mother.

Revision: She eats healthy meals, exercises regularly, brushes and flosses her teeth daily, and visits her mother each week.

LANGUAGE/DICTION. (Avoid contractions, slang expressions, IM-speak, and profanity in academic papers and essays.)

Problem: Well, Scott wasn't too cool when he dissed my mom. Damn!

Revision: Also, Scott showed his immaturity when he insulted my mother.

CONCISENESS. Unnecessary words and phrases can be removed to create clear, concise writing that saves readers valuable time.

Problem: In the early part of May, a snowstorm was moving threateningly toward Fargo.

Revision: In early May, a snowstorm threatened Fargo.

Problem: Singers auditioned in the tryouts for *The Music Man*.

Revision: Singers auditioned for *The Music Man*.

Problem: Each student has a different learning style and unique ability that he or she uses in his or her writing.

Revision: Each student has a unique learning style and writing ability.

TITLES.

- Titles of books, magazines, web sites, and other large works are italicized (or underlined): Aldous Huxley wrote *A Brave New World*.
- Titles of articles, essays, or web links/articles (within a larger site) are placed in quotation marks:
Landry's "Expert System for the Control of Potato Storage Environments" was published in *Applied Engineering in Agriculture*.
- Question marks and exclamation points go inside quotation marks, if they are part of the quotation. Commas and periods always go inside of quotation marks:
He read two poems, "Who Is There?" and "Yipes!" Have you read "The Monkey's Paw"?
She sang two John Lennon songs, "Eleanor Rigby" and "Imagine."

POSSESSIVES AND CONTRACTIONS. (Avoid using contractions in formal writing.)

Possessives

its paw

whose book

her/hers

his

your

my/mine

our/ours

Contractions

it's = it is

who's = who is

she's = she is,

she'd = she would

he's = he is

he'd

you're = you are

I've = I have

I'd = I would

we've = we have

would've = would have (NOT would of)

could've = could have (NOT could of)

there's = there is

NUMERALS. Do not begin a sentence with a numeral. Style manuals vary, but a general rule is to write out numbers under ten, except when they are used with units of measurement (ft., mi., etc.) Other unique cases include the following:

- abbreviations or symbols (3 %) (4:20 p.m.)
- addresses (501 Main Street)
- dates (April 1, 2001) (1 May 2004)
- page references (page 3)
- technical units and measurements (15 amperes, 6 lbs.)
- large numbers (4.5 million).

Problem: 75 people were there.

Revision: Seventy-five people attended the parade.

Problem: 1989 was a very difficult year.

Revisions: Indeed, 1989 was a very difficult year.