Improving Grammar
About Me

I’m Emily Rose Cole, the Graduate Assistant to the Academic Writing Center (coleer@mail.uc.edu)

I’m a PhD candidate in the English and I’ve taught composition and creative writing for over seven years at the university level.

I’m here to assist you and develop presentations through AWC to meet your needs as grad students.

Don’t hesitate to reach out!
In this presentation we’ll...

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Clarity</th>
<th>Examine how standardized, academic grammar, clear language, and well-defined terms can keep your ideas clear and understandable to a variety of readers.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td>Discuss how tweaks like avoiding nominalizations, understanding modifiers, and clarifying pronouns increase accuracy in writing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>Illustrate how word choice, revising, and proofreading are key to the process of finalizing an excellent report, paper, or presentation.</td>
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Grammar: Writing for Clarity

THEY'RE DIFFERENT WORDS
Understanding Audience

- Writing isn’t just about proper grammar and perfect sentences. To write well, you need to understand who you’re talking to.

- How we convey written information depends on the writer’s audience.

- A scientist might write about an experiment’s findings in an academic article or in a tweet, but the way to convey that information will vary based on the medium and the audience.
Grammar, Tone, and Clarity

In the context of academic writing, **good writing** is synonymous with **good grammar**.

This idea is a **myth**. Many excellent writers break grammar rules to produce wonderful writing.

However, especially in academic writing, using a standard English grammar is a tool used to clarify meaning.

Just as a consistent academic tone helps an audience understand the author’s point of view, adhering to standard academic grammar practices helps a writer **communicate clearly to an academic audience.**
Jargon refers to special words or expressions that are used by a particular profession or group and are difficult for others to understand.

Jargon is different for every field. Sometimes, jargon is necessary to articulate a concept clearly, but it is easy to overuse.

When revising, think carefully about your audience, and whether your readers will understand any technical terms you are using. If not, make sure to define those terms, or replace them with simpler language.
Big abstract concepts should be appropriately qualified. Make sure you’re clear about context when you use words that refer to large groups of people:

Example: *Society* teaches us that pink is only for girls. *(very broad)*

Revised: *Contemporary American culture, including media and advertising*, teaches children that pink is only for girls. *(more specific)*
What Is Passive Voice?

Passive Voice

Passive voice emphasizes the objects in the sentence instead of the actors in the sentence:

**The store** is where he ran.

Active Voice

Active voice emphasizes the actors in the sentence:

**He** ran to the store.
Passive voice can make your sentences wordier:

Why was the road crossed by the chicken? (passive)

Why did the chicken cross the road? (active)

Passive voice can obscure who is acting and who is receiving an action in a sentence:

The vase was broken. (Passive - who broke it?)

My sister broke the vase. (Active, actors are clear)
Despite these drawbacks, passive voice can be a useful tool when applied appropriately. Passive voice can:

- Communicate that the “doer” of an action is less important than the results of the action: ‘

  The honeybees were kept in a humidified chamber at room temperature.

- Shift the reader’s focus toward the topic you’re discussing:

  Green plants produce carbohydrates in the presence of light and chlorophyll. (Active voice, emphasizes the action of the plants)

  Carbohydrates are produced by green plants in the presence of light and chlorophyll. (Passive voice, emphasizes the production of the carbohydrates.)
Accuracy
Nominalizations, AKA “Zombie Nouns”

Nominalizations occur when a writer adds a suffix to verb, adjective, or adverb to make a new (often much more complex) noun. Writer Helen Sword has as special name for these kinds of nouns:

“I call them ‘zombie nouns’ because they cannibalize active verbs, suck the lifeblood from adjectives, and substitute abstract entities for human beings.
Zombie nouns makes a sentence confusing

Let’s take a closer look at how zombie nouns—aka nominalizations—make sentences wordier and more confusing to a reader.

There has been an exercise of effective staff information dissemination control on the part of the secretary.

The secretary has effectively controlled the way the staff disseminates information.

Revising the sentence by turning the zombie noun (dissemination) into a verb (disseminate) makes the sentence clear and cleans up the wordiness that makes the sentence hard to understand.
Zombie Nouns in Action

Nominalization Examples:

The alacrity of the brown fox contributes to its ability to perform a vaulting action over the lazy dog.

The students handled the jellyfish with great carelessness.

Nominalizations Replaced with Other Parts of Speech:

The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog.

The students handled the jellyfish carelessly.

Slay your zombie nouns by replacing them with action verbs!
What’s a Modifier?

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In grammar, a modifier is any word or phrase that modifies another word or phrase in some way.

Modifiers are dependent on the words or phrases they modify for their meaning.

Examples, with modifiers highlighted:

- A baby deer
- A woman in a red hat
- She cackled ruefully
- Sabrina, who was a witch
Modifiers should be optional to sentence. The grammar of the sentence shouldn’t change if a modifier is removed.

Modifiers should appear next to (in front or behind) the word or phrase they describe.

When modifiers don’t appear close to their “target words,” we call modifier “misplaced” because it creates confusion for the reader.
Fixing Misplaced Modifiers

If it’s unclear what word or phrase a modifier is attached to, the sentence can become confusing - or sometimes funny.

Churning in the Atlantic Ocean, we anxiously watched the weather report for information about the hurricane. (What was churning, “we,” or the hurricane?)

Fix misplaced modifiers by moving the modifier next to the word or phrase the modifier describes:

We anxiously watched the weather report for information about the hurricane churning in the Atlantic Ocean.

Modifiers should be as close as possible to the word or phrase that they modify.
Dangling Modifiers

Fear not! Shakespeare used dangling modifiers, too!

*Sleeping in my orchard, a serpent stung me.*
- Hamlet

When a sentence has a modifier but no target word or phrase to which the modifier belongs, it’s called a **dangling modifier**.

Examples of sentences with dangling modifiers:

- Hungry, the *leftover pizza* was devoured.
- Rummaging in her giant handbag, the *sunglasses* escaped detection.

Fix dangling modifiers by adding target words:

- Hungry, *we* devoured the *leftover pizza*.
- Rummaging in her giant handbag, Dolores failed to find her *sunglasses*. 
Pronoun/Antecedent Agreement and Reference

- **Pronouns** (I, You, He, She, It, We, They) take the place of nouns

- The **antecedent** is the word to which the pronoun refers.

- For example: *Mary* went to the store and *she* bought candy. (*Mary* is the antecedent for the pronoun *she.*)

- Pronouns must agree with their antecedents in number, gender, and person.
  - Number = singular or plural
  - Gender = masculine, feminine, or neuter
  - Person = 1st, 2nd, or 3rd person
Unclear Pronouns

- Unclear pronouns can also lead to confusion from readers.

- Pronouns are a useful shorthand, especially for longer or more complex phrases. However, unclear pronouns can cause vagueness for readers, which interferes with sentence clarity. For example:

  Original: Sue told Anne she had a problem.

  Who has the problem, Sue or Anne?

  Revised: Sue told Anne that Sue had a problem.

Notice: The second sentence is a bit wordier, but sometimes clarity is more important than concision.
Singular Use They/Them Pronouns

Because English doesn’t have an obvious ungendered pronoun, some English-speaking nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people use the pronouns “they” and “them” to refer to themselves instead of the masculinized or feminized “he” or “she.”

Because “they” pronouns typically correspond to multiple people or objects, this practice can be initially confusing, especially to nonnative speakers.

Most of the time, “they” or “them” refers to a group of people, but be aware that in some contexts, “they” might also refer to a singular nonbinary person:

My friends Jawan and Chelsea are coming over today. I hope you like them!

My nonbinary friend Kay is coming over today. I hope you like them!
Polish
Sentence Fragments

A complete sentence must have three components:
1. A subject (the actor in the sentence)
2. A predicate (the verb or action)
3. A complete thought (it can stand alone and make sense).

A fragment is an incomplete sentence.
- It cannot stand alone and does not express a complete thought.
- Some fragments lack either a subject or a verb or both.
- Dependent clauses are fragments if they stand alone.
Sentence Fragment Examples:

- Went out of business after Starbucks Coffee opened. (Missing subject!)
  - **Revised**: The local coffee shop went out of business after the Starbucks opened.

- One of my friends who won a contest by playing a variety of instruments. (Missing predicate)
  - **Revised**: One of my friends, who won a contest by playing a variety of instruments, is now learning the cello.

- Since I went fishing. (Missing predicate!)
  - **Revised**: I’ve gotten a lot of mosquito bites since I went fishing.
Fragments and Dependent Clauses

- An **independent** clause can stand on its own and create a full thought. This kind of clause contains (at least) a subject and a verb:
  - It pours. (Independent clause)

- A **dependent** clause needs to be attached to an independent clause to create clear meaning (dependent clauses are often modifiers). By itself, a dependent clause doesn’t express a full thought:
  - When it rains (dependent clause)

- To fix a standalone dependent clause, attach it to an independent clause to create a full thought (and a complex sentence!):
  - When it rains, it pours. (two-clause sentence)
Run-On Sentences:

- A **run-on sentence** is a sentence comprised of **two or more independent clauses** that are **not** properly separated. *(Not just a very long sentence!)*

- A run-on sentence can:
  - Lack proper punctuation and/or conjunctions
  - Have incorrect punctuation (for example, a comma where there should be a semicolon)

- A comma splice—two independent clauses joined by a comma—is a type of run-on sentence.
Run-On Sentence Examples:

- When two or more sentences are combined and keep running on:
  - “If you ever have the chance, you should visit the Newport aquarium they have a variety of marine life.”
  - “My favorite kind of ice cream is mint chocolate chip the chocolate and mint combination is refreshing and sweet.”

- How to fix: add punctuation
  - “If you ever have the chance, you should visit the Newport aquarium; they have a variety of marine life.”
  - “My favorite kind of ice-cream is mint chocolate chip. The chocolate and mint combination is refreshing and sweet.”
Tips for Effective Word Choice

- When you’re writing and can’t think of the right word, just put in the best word you can think of in the moment, highlight it, and return to find the best word.

- If you can’t think of the right word, try rewriting the entire sentence.

- Ask yourself if you are using the most effective nouns, verbs, and adjectives - is there a replacement that is more specific or accurate?
Effective Word Choice II

- Explain your argument aloud in your own words - compare what you say to what you wrote and ask if your writing is as clear as how you’d explain it while speaking.

- Read your work aloud to hear where it sounds awkward, redundant, or unclear.

- Use a thesaurus with caution - look up replacement words in the dictionary to make sure they mean what you want them to mean.
Proofreading is crucial to ensure that your writing is correct, clear, and professional.

Frequent errors convey carelessness and a lack of attention to detail.

• Read aloud to yourself or read paragraphs in reverse order to focus your editing skills.
• Ask a colleague to read it over (after you have read it at least once!)

Edit not only for grammatical mistakes but also to improve word choice.

• For example, using more active verbs, varying transitions, clarifying sentence structures etc.)
## Conclusion I

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<tr>
<th>Clarify</th>
<th>Think about what and who you’re writing to before you start writing. Avoid unnecessary jargon and over generalized terms.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Activate</td>
<td>Be conscious of the most effective scenarios in which to use passive or active voice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Articulate</td>
<td>Watch out for “zombie nouns” and replace them with other parts of speech and keep modifiers near their subjects.</td>
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### Conclusion II

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<tr>
<th>Standardize</th>
<th>Make sure that your sentences have a subject and a predicate to avoid sentence fragments and use appropriate punctuation to avoid run-ons.</th>
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<td>Revise</td>
<td>Revise your work once you’ve finished to make sure that your thoughts are coherent and clear. You can punch up your word choice as this stage too!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proofread</td>
<td>Read aloud to yourself to proofread, and get a friend, mentor, or writing tutor to proofread again for you before submitting a paper for review.</td>
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The Academic Writing Center

The Academic Writing Center is here to help you! We have tutors available, helpful handouts, other resources available from our website, Visit our website at uc.edu/awc. All our resources are online this year.

Individual tutoring isn’t just for undergrads! There are graduate tutors who are excited to help you work through any of your writing assignments. Sign up using the “schedule an appointment” tab on the website.

We thank you for attending our first AWC Graduate Workshop. The schedule for the seven other workshops this semester is posted at: www.uc.edu/learningcommons/writingcenter/grad.html
Questions?

Are there questions you have that weren’t covered by this presentation so far? Now’s the time to ask!

Please unmute and ask questions aloud if possible, since multiple questions in chat are hard for me to follow.
References

- Examples from *Grammar Bytes: Grammar Instruction with Attitude*
- Research from the University of Cincinnati’s Academic Writing Center and the Purdue Online Writing Lab
- *Strunk & White: The Elements of Style 4th Edition*