GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Learning Support
Like any other type of writing, academic writing has certain expectations for grammar and style.

English grammar is either correct or incorrect in all situations, while style is the way you present yourself in writing to communicate clearly and project the best image of yourself as a student and a scholar.

At all times, focus on writing concisely and with clarity rather than using elaborate language or complex sentence structure.
GRAMMAR AND STYLE

- Always use formal language and avoid words such as ‘stuff’ or slang.

- Also, avoid overly-emotional language and imagery of any kind. For example, while “the American Dream” is inspiring, it is not factual or specific and relies on emotion rather than evidence to convince your reader.

- The MSW program and USC expect you to be proficient at writing in grammatically and stylistically correct English at all times (this includes email!). Using English correctly shows care, respect, and professionalism and will continue do so throughout your chosen career long after you finish this program.
In this tutorial, we will review the most common issues with which students struggle in academic writing.

Grammar:

- Fragments
- Run-ons
- Pronoun Reference
- Comma Use

Style:

- Passive Voice
First, a little review of the basic components of a sentence.

Every sentence must (at least) have the following:

- **Subject**: Person or thing doing the action
- **Verb**: Action
- **Complete Thought**: Any additional information necessary for the sentence to make sense
A few examples of complete sentences:

- **Subject**
  - Person or thing doing the action

- **Verb**
  - Action

- **Complete Thought**
  - Any additional information necessary for the sentence to make sense

The social worker visited her client’s home.

Juvenile life without parole is unethical.

Researchers believe that a treatment is possible.
The Delegate Assembly is the representative, decision-making body—comprised of 277 elected delegates—through which NASW members set broad organizational policy, establish program priorities, and develop a collective stance on public and professional issues.
As long as these three elements are in a sentence, you have the necessary components. However, anything less than all three is a fragment.

**Subject**
- Person or thing doing the action

**Verb**
- Action

**Complete Thought**
- Any additional information necessary for the sentence to make sense

On the way home, while visiting her client’s home, and found that there were significant issues.

Juvenile life without parole unethical under all circumstances and should not be tolerated.

Researchers assert fervently and will not accept contradicting data.
### COMMA SPLICE AND FUSED SENTENCES

Comma splice (CS) and fused sentence (FS) run-ons occur when two independent clauses (simple sentences, to put it another way) are placed together with either nothing between them or only a comma between them.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Complete thought</th>
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<td>Verb</td>
<td>Complete thought</td>
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Example:

A growing body of literature on volunteering documents individual benefits, such as reduced mortality, increased physical functioning, better self-rated health, higher levels of cognitive functioning, better skill and knowledge development, maintenance of a sense of purpose in life, better muscular strength, it also shows lower levels of depression, reduced pain, and higher levels of satisfaction.
Example:

A growing body of literature on volunteering documents individual benefits, such as reduced mortality, increased physical functioning, better self-rated health, higher levels of cognitive functioning, better skill and knowledge development, maintenance of a sense of purpose in life, better muscular strength, it also shows lower levels of depression, reduced pain, and higher levels of satisfaction.

Again, the subjects are blue, verbs are red, and complete thoughts are green. However, there are two complete sentences (clauses) joined together, but this time with only a comma.
Example:

Volunteering has become an important strategy to boost the civic engagement and well-being of the growing older population. A wealth of evidence supports a relationship between volunteering and positive health and mental health outcomes for older adults.
Let’s look at a few examples:

Volunteering has become an important strategy to boost the civic engagement and well-being of the growing older population. A wealth of evidence supports a relationship between volunteering and positive health and mental health outcomes for older adults.

The subjects are blue, verbs are red, and complete thoughts are green. Notice that there are two complete sentences (clauses) joined together with… nothing.
CORRECTING COMMA SPLICES AND FUSED SENTENCES

The simplest way to fix a run-on is to use a period and start a new sentence.

Volunteering has become an important strategy to boost the civic engagement and well-being of the growing older population. A wealth of evidence supports a relationship between volunteering and positive health and mental health outcomes for older adults.
Another solution is the semi-colon, but use these sparingly and only between independent clauses (complete sentences). If you’re not sure whether you’re using them correctly (or over-using them), you should avoid using them at all.

Volunteering has become an important strategy to boost the civic engagement and well-being of the growing older population; a wealth of evidence supports a relationship between volunteering and positive health and mental health outcomes for older adults.
Finally, you can use a comma followed by one of the FANBOYS (coordinating conjunctions) to join to independent clauses (complete sentences). FANBOYS is an acronym to help you remember these words: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.

A growing body of literature on volunteering documents individual benefits, such as reduced mortality, increased physical functioning, better self-rated health, higher levels of cognitive functioning, better skill and knowledge development, maintenance of a sense of purpose in life, better muscular strength, and it also shows lower levels of depression, reduced pain, and higher levels of satisfaction.
PRONOUN REFERENCE

Pronouns must *always* refer to a noun. Pronouns include words such as he, she, it, they, those, this... and so on.

Pronoun reference errors are most frequent when the pronoun either does not refer to a specific noun, does not refer to the correct noun, or does not match the noun in number or gender.
Examples of incorrect pronoun reference:

This was measured as a range of benefits from various volunteer programs, including meaningful activity, socialization, improved life, and personal growth.

What is “this” referring to?

The author found that several factors increased the institutional capacity of volunteer situations, and they also found scheduling flexibility, transportation and mobility facilitation, role recognition, and stipends had a significant effect.

Who are “they” if only one author is mentioned?
To correct a pronoun reference error, substitute a more specific noun or pronoun, change the sentence structure, or make sure that the noun matches the pronoun in number and gender.

**Instead of:** This was measured as a range of benefits from various volunteer programs, including meaningful activity, socialization, improved life, and personal growth.

**Use:** The progress was measured as a range of benefits from various volunteer programs, including meaningful activity, socialization, improved life, and personal growth.
Instead of: The author found that several factors increased the institutional capacity of volunteer situations, and they also found scheduling flexibility, transportation and mobility facilitation, role recognition, and stipends had a significant effect.

Use: The author found that several factors increased the institutional capacity of volunteer situations, and he or she also found scheduling flexibility, transportation and mobility facilitation, role recognition, and stipends had a significant effect.
COMMA USE

Arguably the trickiest element in the English language, commas have many uses. However, none of these uses include indicating a ‘pause’ in the sentence as it would be spoken because the written and spoken versions of English diverged long ago. Here are the most common uses for the comma:

1. **Listing**: when including **one, two, or three** different things.

2. **After an introductory element**, a comma is appropriate if the rest of the sentence can stand alone as an independent clause.

3. Commas can be used before a concluding element, **as long as the portion before the comma works as a sentence (independent clause) by itself.**
COMMA USE CONTINUED

4. Around interrupters, which are parts of a sentence that can be taken out from the middle while still leaving a complete sentence, commas are useful to show where the interrupter begins and ends.

5. Commas can be used to join two complete sentences, but a FANBOYS word (coordinating conjunction) must be used after the comma.

6. Often, these tricky, complicated, annoying commas can be used to separate adjectives describing the same noun.
Passive voice becomes a problem when the actor (subject) of a sentence does not appear before the action (verb) of that sentence. We’re either left wondering who did the action or the awkward construction takes away emphasis from the *doer*.

**Examples:**

It was thought that the client needed help, when she clearly did not.

“Thought” by whom?

Social work is known to be a difficult field of study.

“Known” to whom?

Often, agencies are believed to be ineffectual when they do not have sufficient funds to make a difference.

“Believed” by whom?
CORRECTING PASSIVE VOICE

Rather than using passive voice, begin the sentence with the subject or ‘doer’ of the sentence and revise the rest of the sentence to work with that format.

**Original:** It was thought that the client needed help, when she clearly did not.

**Corrected:** The agency thought that the client needed help, when she clearly did not.
Original: Social work is known to be a difficult field of study.

Corrected: Social work is a difficult field of study.

Original: Often, agencies are believed to be ineffectual when they do not have sufficient funds to make a difference.

Corrected: Often, people see agencies as ineffectual when they do not have sufficient funds to make a difference.
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- USC SOWK LibGuide at: [http://libguides.usc.edu/SOWKlearningsupport](http://libguides.usc.edu/SOWKlearningsupport)
- Learning Support Group Tutorials
- Learning Support Writing Coaches