Sentence Problems

Some of the most common sentence problems are subject–verb agreement, pronoun–referent agreement, lack of parallelism, and misplaced or dangling modifiers. These rules should help.

Subject–verb agreement

Rule #1:

Make sure the subject of the sentence and the verb agree in number and in person. (To identify the subject, remember that it will never be in a prepositional phrase or in a nonessential phrase separated from other parts of the sentence by commas.)

Examples of Rule #1:

The supervisor and several employees like the work. (plural subject and verb)
The supervisor, along with several employees, likes the work. (singular subject and verb)

Rule #2:

Compound subjects joined by and require a plural verb, unless and separates terms that refer to a single person or is preceded by each, every, or many.

Examples of Rule #2:

My son and daughter–in–law were here last night.
My wife and best friend [same person] is going to Europe without me.
Each husband and wife is required to be present.

Rule #3:

Compound subjects joined by or or nor require either a singular or a plural verb, depending on the noun closest to the verb. If one noun is singular and one is plural, put the plural noun last and make the verb plural.

Examples of Rule #3:

My son or my daughter is planning the party. (singular subject and verb)
My sons and daughters are planning the party. (plural subject and verb)
My son or my daughters are planning the party. (plural subject last)

Rule #4:

When a number is used as a subject, use a plural verb. When the number is used as a subject, use a singular verb.

Examples of Rule #4:

A number of people are expected to attend.
The number of people is expected to increase.
Rule #5:
When the phrase one of those precedes a word ending in –s, use a plural verb.

Example of Rule #5:
Sara is one of those employees who are always on time.

Rule #6:
Indefinite pronouns such as each, every, everyone, everybody, everything, somebody, anybody, either, and neither take singular verbs. (See exception below.)

Examples of Rule #6:
Each person must bring his or her own lunch.
Everyone is going to be invited to the company picnic.

EXCEPTION: When the pronouns either or neither are used with or or nor, the verb must agree with the noun or the pronoun closest to the verb. If one noun or pronoun is singular and one is plural, put the plural noun or pronoun last and make the verb plural.

Either my husband or my brother will bring his car.
Neither my cousins nor my sisters have ever been in a beauty contest.
Neither my boss nor my co–workers were aware of the changes in the organization.

Rule #7:
When the words none, some, most, all, or the majority precede the verb, the meaning of the sentence determines whether the verb is singular or plural.

Examples of Rule #7:
Some of the meat is overcooked. (The sentence refers to a portion of the meat, a single unit. Therefore, use a singular verb.)
Some of us are leaving the party early. (The sentence refers to several people; therefore, use a plural verb.)

Rule #8:
If the subject consists of a phrase or a clause, use a singular verb.

Example of Rule #8:
The Class of ’99 is planning a class project.

Pronoun–referent agreement

Rule #9:
Make sure the word a pronoun refers to is clear.
Examples of Rule #9:

*Correct:* A manager should not conduct an interview in a subordinate's office.
*Incorrect:* A manager should not interview a subordinate in her office.

**Parallelism**

Rule #10:

Use parallel sentence construction. (Phrase similar ideas in similar ways.) To ensure parallelism, repeat articles and infinitives with each item in a series.

Examples of Rule #10:

For his birthday, Harvey asked for a watch, a bicycle, and a tennis racquet. Donna Jo was asked to write, to answer phones, and to attend meetings.

*Correct:* Speaking in public is sometimes harder than speaking on the phone.
*Incorrect:* Speaking in public is sometimes harder than to speak on the phone.

Rule #11:

Avoid incomplete comparisons.

Examples of Rule #11:

*Correct:* Our new employee is more proficient in word processing than in graphic design.
*Incorrect:* Our new employee is more proficient in word processing.

Rule #12:

Avoid shifts in personal pronouns from singular to plural in the same sentence.

Examples of Rule #12:

*Correct:* For an individual to be hired, he or she must complete a job application.
*Incorrect:* For an individual to be hired, they must complete a job application.

**Modifiers**

Rule #13:

Avoid misplaced modifiers. A modifier is a word or a phrase that describes a noun or a verb. If it is misplaced, the sentence can be confusing or ridiculous. Often the problem is caused by placing the modifier too far away from the word it is describing. To correct this problem, keep related words and phrases close together.

Examples of Rule #13:

*Correct:* The watch with the cracked face was worn by the woman.
*Incorrect:* The watch was worn by the woman with the cracked face.
Rule #14:

Avoid dangling modifiers. A dangling modifier is a word or phrase that describes another word or phrase that has not been clearly stated in the sentence. When an introductory phrase does not name the performer of an action, then it refers to the subject of the independent clause that follows. If the introductory phrase describes the subject of that independent clause, the sentence is correct.

Examples of Rule #14:

When filled with hot air, the balloon carried four people.

However, if the introductory phrase describes a word or a phrase that is not the subject of the independent clause, the result is a dangling modifier.

Incorrect: When filled with hot air, four people rose into the sky in a balloon. (People is the subject of the independent clause.)

Fix a dangling modifier by naming the performer of the action in the introductory phrase or by rewording the independent clause to reflect the introductory phrase.

When John filled the balloon with hot air, it carried four people into the sky.
When filled with hot air, the balloon carried four people into the sky.

Rule #15:

Avoid squinting modifiers. By definition, a modifier modifies only one word or phrase. A squinting modifier is a modifier that can modify the word that comes before it or the word that comes after it.

Examples of Rule #15:

Incorrect: The gate opened abruptly waking the neighbors. (Did the gate open abruptly or did the neighbors wake up abruptly?)

To fix a squinting modifier, rewrite the sentence so that the modifier clearly modifies only one word or phrase.

The abruptly opened gate woke the neighbors.