

# MECHANICS STANDARDS IN ENGINEERING WRITING

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The following list reflects the most common grammar and punctuation errors I see in student writing. Avoid these problems when you write professionally.

## GRAMMAR AND SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Along with writing precisely and concisely, make sure you use appropriate and correct grammar and sentence structure.

### **The tense and voice of the thesis\***

Engineering writing uses both passive voice and past tense (unlike literary writing). Use past tense, passive voice to discuss your own work. Use past tense, active voice to discuss the work of others:

TOO PERSONAL: I measured the strain.

ENGINEERING APPROPRIATE: The strain was measured.

TOO LITERARY: The researcher discusses his measuring of the strain.

ENGINEERING APPROPRIATE: The researcher measured the strain.

AVOID THIS TYPE OF CONSTRUCTION: Measuring the strain resulted in a . . . It's too easy to say something you don't mean— the act of measuring did not cause a result.

### **Dangling modifiers**

Here is the classic example to help you avoid dangling modifiers:

Running down the street, the building was on fire. (The introductory phrase takes the first subject noun as its subject, and then . . .)

Here's some more:

After breaking my back, my doctor told me not to work so hard.

I saw deer, riding bikes in the park.

### **Ending sentences with prepositions and splitting infinitives**

Previous generations were taught that both of the above practices were grammar sins. Modern grammarians have rejected these rules:

- It is now acceptable “**To boldly go** where know man has gone before” (and split infinitives along the way—*to go* is the infinitive).
- Feel free to share with us the topic you wrote **about** (you don't need to say “the topic *about which* you wrote”)

# PUNCTUATION

Punctuation makes writing easier to read. It can also affect meaning. Use it correctly.

## **Commas**

Many English teachers will tell you that the final comma in a series is optional. Some style guides say you may skip a comma after an introductory phrase. Always use commas if your reader may misread a sentence:

**Use the final series comma** to avoid ambiguity →

WITHOUT THE COMMA: I wish to thank my parents, Britney Spears and Dick Cheney.

**Use a comma after an introductory phrase** to prevent misreading →

WITHOUT THE COMMA: As Alfred started eating his cat jumped up on the table.

**Use commas to set off information not necessary for identifying a noun** (restrictive vs. non-restrictive elements) →

WITHOUT THE COMMAS: Jane's husband who is twenty-one likes escargot. (As soon as the authorities see this sentence, this woman is going to jail)

WITH THE COMMAS: My brother, who is 40, works in San Pedro. (Because of the commas, the reader knows I only have one brother.)

**Use a comma to divide if-then sentence construction:** *Writing* is not a word. If you use it, I will fail you.

**Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction** when it begins an independent clause (*For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So*—the FANBOYS):

CORRECT: Sometimes my dog barks at squirrels, but other times he just ignores them.

INCORRECT: My dog barks at squirrels, and birds.

## **Semi-colon\***

Use the semi-colon in these situations:

- to separate two independent clauses—that is, sentences that could stand alone but for which you prefer to show a closer connection→

*Writing* is not a word. Don't use it. OR *Writing* is not a word; don't use it.

- to separate list items that are long or already have commas in them→

I walked to the store, the park, and the bank; climbed the tree, which had the cat in it, in the backyard; and fixed the bicycle, the wagon, and the car. (However, I never recommend writing a sentence of this length.)

## **Colons to introduce a list**

Style guides offer several variants of the rules for introducing a list. **Always** use a sentence or phrase to introduce a list. Here is the simplest rule:

### **Use a colon at the end of a complete sentence →**

Bring the following to class:

- pens
- notebooks
- calculators

### **Use no punctuation for a portion of a sentence finished off by the list items** (and make sure the grammar flows logically from the intro to the list items)→

At the meeting, we will discuss

- raises
- expenses
- vacations

## **List punctuation**

You have several choices for punctuating a list. Choose a consistent style to use throughout a document.

### **Use periods at the end of each item →**

Bring the following to class:

- pens.
- notebooks.
- calculators.

### **Use no periods at all →**

Bring the following to class:

- pens
- notebooks
- calculators

### **Use a period only at the end of the list →**

Bring the following to class:

- pens
- notebooks
- calculators.

## Hyphens

The rules for using hyphens vary from style guide to style guide. Pick a consistent style and use it throughout the document. The following rule, however, does not vary:

**Use hyphens only to connect words to words or numbers to words;** don't use them in place of bullets or to connect parts of a sentence (despite what you see as the default on *PowerPoint*) →

INCORRECT: I need to buy the following at the store:

- peas
- pistachios
- pomegranates

INCORRECT: My sister giggles too much-her laughter makes me crazy.

CORRECT: My sister giggles too much—her laughter makes me crazy.  
(Notice the double dash or em-dash.)

CORRECT: I have a twelve-year-old sister.

CORRECT: I need to buy the following at the store:

- peas
- pistachios
- pomegranates

## Quotations

Always include a quotation as part of a larger sentence. A quote should never stand alone:

CORRECT: Mary Forte says, “Don't forget to introduce all quotations!”

INCORRECT: “We don't need no stinking badges!” That's the movie line that always comes into my head.

Do not use quotation marks to indicate emphasis—Seen on a menu: “Fresh” taco's

## WORD CHOICES

Use precise, standard English. Carelessness with word choice at best can make you look careless, at worst can confuse the audience or say something completely wrong.

### The general you

Avoid the word *you* as a substitute for *people*, *everyone*, or large groups of people. →

CONFUSING: You should shave your legs before putting on fishnet stockings (has no significance for those who never wear fishnet stockings, or could make readers think you are telling them to do something).

### **Amount vs. number**

Many people use the word *amount* freely in their speech. We have different rules for using it in written English:

**Use *number* when you refer to something that can be counted (notice the word *counted* as opposed to *measured* →**

We talked to a large **number** of people for this report.

**Use *amount* when you refer to something that cannot be counted (or usually isn't)→**

I spilled a large **amount** of sugar on the floor. (although a precise measurement would be the best choice here)

### **Less vs. fewer**

People often use the word *less* instead of *fewer* in their speech. The rules for written English say

**Use *fewer* when you refer to something that can be counted →**

We **fewer** pencils than pens. (The grocery store standard, “10 items or less,” makes English teachers crazy)

**Use *less* when you refer to something that cannot be counted →**

We have **less** asphalt than concrete.

### **The naked *this*** (thank you to Kristen Woolever for this term)

The word *this* can be a useful pronoun, but take care how you use it.

**Use the word *this* with a noun** or you may write something ambiguous →

AMBIGUOUS: John eats worms for breakfast and then cleans the plates. This makes his mother ill. (Which part makes her ill?)

CLEAR: John eats worms for breakfast and then cleans the plates. This diet makes his mother ill.

### **Source references and other names**

The first time you use a person's name, use both first and last: Taylor Smith. Afterwards refer to that person by his or her last name: Smith. (Exceptions: if you know that person well, if that person is a juvenile, if everyone knows who you mean (Beethoven), or if you are writing informally; you may use the first name.)

### **Mr., Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr.\***

*Miss* and *Mrs.* are archaic; don't use them unless you are writing to someone who has specifically told you otherwise. Use *Dr.* if you know this title is correct. If you don't know for sure, you can use *Prof.* in academic correspondence.

### **Gender neutral language**

Modern writing no longer uses *he* and *him* as neutral pronouns:

INCORRECT: Every doctor should have **his** own stethoscope.

BETTER (BUT A LITTLE CLUNKY): Every doctor should have **his or her** own stethoscope.

BETTER: **All doctors** should have **their** own stethoscopes. (pluralized)

BETTER: Every doctor should have a stethoscope. (possessive pronoun eliminated)

NOT REALLY AN OPTION: Every doctor should have their own stethoscope. (mixed singular and plural)

### 👉 **Who vs. whom\***

*Who* is the subject pronoun; you can use it where you would use the words *he, she, they*:

**He** wrote the proposal → **Who** wrote the proposal?

*Whom* is the object pronoun; you can use it where you would use the words *him, her, them*:

The man **whom** they interviewed works for Raytheon. (they interviewed **him**)  
(Better yet, say this, “The man I saw yesterday works for Raytheon.”)

### 👉 **Firstly, secondly, thirdly\***

Don’t use them; they sound pompous. *First, second, and third* work just fine. Do make sure if you use the word *first*, the word *second* also appears in the section.

## SPELLING

Below you will find a list of words that people frequently confuse and consequently misspell. Except for “*definitely*”, the spellchecker usually won’t catch these:

### 👉 **Affect vs. effect\***

This distinction is subtle, painful, irritating, annoying, and so on. Luckily, Deborah Wilhelm has offered a useful explanation [Forte’s comments and bold]:

**Effect is a noun, but not always.**

*Effect* (noun) — the result [cause and **effect**]

*Effect* (verb) — to cause or bring about [**effect** a change—a less common usage]

**Affect is usually a verb, but not always.**

*Affect* (verb) — to influence [The budget cuts may **affect** tuition rates at Cal Poly.]

*Affect* (noun) — a state of emotion (note: this is the least likely use of the word [ask a psych major])

To know which is correct, substitute in the definition and see if it makes sense:

That movie affected me deeply. → That movie influenced me deeply. (this makes sense)

That movie effected me deeply. → That movie caused me deeply. (this does not make sense)

That movie’s affect was I could not sleep. → That movie’s emotion was I could not sleep.  
(incorrect)

That movie’s effect was I could not sleep. → That movie’s result was I could not sleep. (correct)

### **Definitely vs. defiantly (definAtely is not a word)**

I *definitely* want to spell this word correctly; however, some spell checkers correct “definAtely” to *defiantly*.

*Defiantly* is how your cat lies on the couch even when you told it to get off. (Picture the smug look in its eyes.)

### **Everyday vs. every day**

Use *everyday* (it’s an adjective) to modify a noun: I wore my *everyday* shoes (← noun) to school.

Use *every day* to indicate when something happens: I ride my bike to school *every day*.

### **Into vs. in to**

I am going to turn this paper *into* my teacher. Then my backpack will be really, really heavy.

I am going to turn this paper *in to* my teacher. She will be happy to get it.

### **Posses vs. possess**

For *posses*, think Westerns: When Curly Bill escaped, we rounded up some *posses* and hunted him down.

For *possess*, think ownership: I *possess* a large number of paperclips.

### **Supposed to, used to, accustomed to**

Those are the correct spellings above. Notice the *ds* that you often can’t hear in speech: I am *supposed to* remember to put the **d** at the end of those words, but I’m not *used to* it. So I’m *accustomed to* leaving it off. But now I will change my ways!

### **Than vs. then\***

*Than* is a comparison → I’m shorter **than** most of the students in this class.

*Then* indicates time → He did his homework. **Then** he went out to play.

### **Who’s vs. whose\***

*Who’s* = *Who is*

*Whose* = possessive pronoun (equivalent to *his, her, their* → **whose** dog? **their** dog.)

\*These sections adapted from Deborah Wilhelm’s *English Paramedic*