Do's, Don'ts, and Maybes: Legal Writing
Grammar—Part I

Gerald Lebovits
“A Just Cause for War”

How slave transit in an abolitionist state sparked New York’s Dred Scott decision.

by William H. Manz

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Did the Appellate Odds Change in 2006?
In four of the last five columns, the Legal Writer discussed the things you should and shouldn’t do in legal writing. We continue with 10 grammar issues and, in the next column, with 10 more. Studying these 20 grammar issues offers a framework to write comprehensible, intelligent documents. Good grammar is a good start, although good legal writing demands much more. Knowing grammar won’t make you a good legal writer. But you’re a poor legal writer if you don’t know grammar.

Grammar is a system or set of rules that govern a language. English categorizes words into eight different parts of speech according to how the words function in a sentence: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, conjunctions, interjections, and prepositions. Nouns refer to an event, idea, person, place, quality, substance, or thing. Pronouns are used in place of a noun. Verbs name an action, occurrence, or state of being. Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, clauses, sentences, and other adverbs. Adverbs don’t modify nouns. Adjectives modify nouns or pronouns. A conjunction connects two words, phrases, or clauses. An interjection shows strong emotion. A preposition links to another word in the sentence a noun or a pronoun following the preposition.

Here are the most common grammar errors — not the controversies; only the recognized, accepted errors — and how to fix them.


If the noun ends in a “y” and a consonant precedes the “y,” change the “y” to “i” and add “es.” “Baby” becomes “babies.” “Beauty” becomes “ beauties.” If the noun ends in a “y” and a vowel precedes the “y,” add an “s.” “Alley” becomes “alleys.” “Attorney” becomes “attorneys.”


If a name ends in “f,” add an “s” to form the plural. “Mr. and Mrs. Wolf” becomes “the Wolves.”

To pluralize compound words, make the main word plural. “Attorney general” becomes “Attorneys general.” “Court-martial” becomes “courts-martial.” “Passerby” becomes “passersby.” “Sister-in-law” becomes “sisters-in-law.” Two exceptions: (1) if the compound word has no noun, add an “s” to the end of the word; (2) if the compound word ends in “ful,” add an “s” at the end. Examples: “Dress-up” becomes “dress-ups.” “Takeoff” becomes “takeoffs.” “Teaspoonful” becomes “teaspoonfuls.” “Cupful” becomes “cupfuls.”


Some nouns stay the same whether they’re singular or plural. Example: “deer,” “fish,” “moose,” “Portuguese,” “sheep,” “sheep,” and “species.”

Some words maintain their Latin or Greek form in the plural. “Nucleus” becomes “nuclei”; “syl labus” becomes “syl lables” (“syl labuses” is acceptable); “focus” becomes “foci”; “fungus” becomes “fungi”; “cactus” becomes “cacti” (“cactuses” is acceptable); “thesis” becomes “theses”; “crisis” becomes “crises”; “phenomenon” becomes “phenomena”; “index” becomes “indices” (“indexes” is acceptable); “appendix” becomes “appendices” (“appendixes” is acceptable); “criterion” becomes “criteria.”

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**A verbs must agree with its subject.**

If a noun ends in “ics” and refers to a body of knowledge, a science, or course of study, it’s usually singular. Examples: “mathematics,” “phonetics,” and “semantics.” If a noun ends in “ics” and refers to concrete activities, practices, or phenomena, it’s usually plural. Examples: “athletics,” “mechanics,” and “acoustics.” Sometimes whether nouns are singular or plural depends on their meaning. Example: “Acoustics is the study of sound.” (Singular.) Or:
Legal writers will object to you fusing participles.

Use reflexive and intensive pronouns only to refer back to a pronoun. Some common reflexive and intensive pronouns: “myself,” “yourself,” “yourselves,” “ourselves,” “herself,” “himself,” “itself,” “themselves,” and “itself.” Examples: “I said that to myself.” (Reflexive pronoun.) “I myself said that.” (Intensive pronoun.) Incorrect: “Mary and me went to court.” In this example in which “Mary” replaces a pronoun, follow the same rule: Delete “Mary.” The sentence makes sense if you say “I went to court.” Therefore: “Mary and I went to court.” Incorrect: “The judge played softball with me and I.” The sentence doesn’t make sense if you delete “Henry and.” The sentence would be, incorrectly: “The judge played softball with I.” Therefore: “The judge played softball with Henry and me.”

Never use these nonstandard reflexive and intensive pronouns: “theirself,” “theirselves,” “themself,” and “themselves.” Pronouns must agree with their antecedents in gender, person, and number. An antecedent is the noun to which the pronoun refers. Example of a singular antecedent with a singular pronoun: “Jane [singular antecedent] alleges that XYZ Corp. violated her [singular, feminine pronoun] constitutional rights.” Example of a plural antecedent with a plural pronoun: “Mary and Jane [plural antecedent] alleges that XYZ Corp. violated their [plural pronoun] rights.”

Indefinite pronouns don’t refer to any specific person or thing. Here are some common indefinite pronouns: “all,” “any,” “anyone,” “anybody,” “anything,” “each,” “either,” “everyone,” “everybody,” “everything,” “little,” “much,” “neither,” “nobody,” “no one,” “none,” “nothing,” “other,” “one,” “somebody,” “someone,” and “something.” These indefinite pronouns are always singular. Incorrect: “Everyone has their price.” Becomes: “Everyone has his price.” To eliminate the sexist language, rewrite the sentence. Correct: “Everyone has a price.”
ate the firm’s policies.” Correct: “We attorneys can no longer tolerate the firm’s policies.” If you drop the noun “attorneys,” the sentence makes sense: “We can no longer tolerate the firm’s policies.” Incorrect: “The firm has given us paralegals no alternative.” If you drop the noun “paralegals,” the sentence wouldn’t make sense: “The firm has given we no alternative.” Correct: “The firm has given us paralegals no alternative.” If you drop the noun, the sentence now makes sense: “The firm has given us no alternative.”

3. Fused Participles. Fused participles occur when a writer fails to use a possessive form of a noun or pronoun to introduce a gerund. Use logic to solve fused-participle problems by eliminating miscues. Ask yourself where the reference and stress should be. Incorrect: “The People objected to the defendant leaving the courtroom a free man.” The gerund “leaving” is fused into the noun “defendant.” “Leaving” is the object of the preposition “to”; “leaving” doesn’t modify the noun “defendant.” In this sentence, the reader might incorrectly believe that the People objected to the defendant. Therefore: “The People objected to the notion that the defendant would leave the courtroom a free man.” Or insert an apostrophe: “The People objected to the defendant’s leaving the courtroom a free man.”

Fused participles affect pronouns. Incorrect: “Do you mind us getting all these cases?” In this example, the writer didn’t mean to write “Do you mind us?” But that’s what the reader understands. Correct: “Do you mind our getting all these cases?” Incorrect: “The police objected to them possessing contraband.” In this example, the writer did not mean, “The police objected to them.” Correct: “The police objected to their possessing contraband.” In this example, the writer did not mean to write, “My parole officer objected to me living alone.” The writer did not mean to write, “My parole officer objected to me living.” Correct: “My parole officer objected to my living alone.”

The writer did not mean to write, “The judge feared the Constitution.” Becomes: “The judge feared that the Constitution would become a shield for lawlessness.” Or: “The judge feared the Constitution’s becoming a shield for lawlessness.”

4. Verb Tenses and Moods. Verbs have six tenses: present, past, future, present perfect, past perfect, and future perfect. The last three tenses (present perfect, past perfect, and future perfect) are also known as the past participle form. The present refers to actions occurring when the writer is writing. The past refers to actions that occurred before the writer wrote. The future refers to actions that will occur after the writer writes. The present perfect refers to actions that began in the past and were completed before the present. Use the past perfect when one past action was completed before another past action began. Use the future perfect when an action that started in the past will end at a certain time in the future.

An example of the verb “talk” using the different tenses: “talk” (present); “talked” (past); “will talk” (future); “have talked” (present perfect); “had talked” (past perfect); and “will have talked” (future perfect).

Form the present perfect by using “have” or “has” before the past participle. Form the past perfect by adding “had” before the past participle. Form the future perfect by adding “will have” before the past participle.

Three moods exist in English: indicative, imperative, and subjunctive. Use the indicative for statements of fact or questions. Use the imperative for orders or commands. Use the subjunctive to express a wish, an idea contrary to fact, a requirement, or a suggestion or recommendation. Examples of indicative mood: “Julia researches in the library.” “Sarah writes all day.” Examples of imperative mood: “Be quiet.” “Argue the motion.” Examples of subjunctive mood: “She wishes her partner were here.” “If John were more aggressive, he’d be a better attorney.” “Ashley would have passed the bar exam if she had studied harder.” “The suspect acted as if he were guilty.” “The judge requested Mrs. Doe’s presence at the hearing.”

5. Irregular verbs. For most verbs, form the past tense by adding a “d” or “ed” at the end of the verb. “Talk” becomes “talked.” “Play” becomes “played.” Other verbs are irregular. Irregular verbs change a vowel and add “n” or “en”; change a vowel and add “d” or “t”; or don’t change at all.

To form the past participle, use a helping verb: “is,” “are,” “was,” or “has been.” Then add the principal part of the verb.


7. Agreement. A verb must agree in numbers with its subjects. Incorrect: The color of the clouds are gray. Correct: The color of the clouds is gray. (Color is gray.) Incorrect: The difference between Cardozo and Holmes, and between Frankfurter and Jackson, are striking. Correct: The difference between Cardozo and Holmes, and between Frankfurter and Jackson, is striking. (Difference is striking.) Incorrect: Justice Jackson, as well as the hundreds of judges who emulate his writing style, rely on plain Anglo-Saxon English. Correct: Justice Jackson, as well as the hundreds of judges who emulate his writing style, relies on plain Anglo-Saxon English.

8. Parallelism. Sentences are parallel when nouns match nouns, verbs match verbs, gerunds match gerunds, and so on. Incorrect: A rule that is both intelligent and necessary. Correct: A rule both intelligent and necessary. Incorrect: The rule is found in the cases, statutes, and in the contracts. Correct: The rule is found in the cases, statutes, and contracts.

Parallelism requires that parallel coordinates form matching pairs: “although/nevertheless,” “although/yet,” “as/as,” “both/and,” “either/or,” “if/then,” “just as/so,” “neither/not,” “not only/but also,” and “whether/or.” Incorrect: Not only do I like landlord-tenant practice but also family law. Correct: Not only do I like landlord-tenant practice but also I like family law. Or: “I like not only landlord-tenant practice but also
family law.” Or, in the positive: “I like landlord-tenant practice and family law.”

Exceptions: Use “neither . . . or,” “not . . . or,” or “not . . . nor” only if the first negative doesn’t carry over to the second negative or for dramatic emphasis.

9. Sentence Fragments. A sentence fragment isn’t a short sentence. It’s a sentence that can’t stand on its own, an incomplete sentence. A sentence fragment lacks a subject or a verb. Example: “The attorney questioning the witness.” “Questioning” is a participle modifying “attorney.” To create a complete sentence, change “questioning” from a participle to a main verb or add a main verb. Becomes: “The attorney questioned the witness.” Or: “The attorney was questioning the witness.”

Sometimes a fragment is a subordinate clause posing as a complete sentence. If you add “although,” “when,” or “until” in front of a main, or independent, clause, the clause becomes a subordinate, or dependent, clause. Example of a main clause: “The attorney questions the witness.” Subordinate clause: “When the attorney questions the witness.” Attach subordinate clauses to main, or independent, clauses. Example: “When the attorney questions a witness [subordinate clause], the judge will interrupt the testimony [main clause].” Here’s a list of other subordinating conjunctions: “after,” “as,” “as if,” “as long as,” “as soon as,” “as though,” “because,” “before,” “even if,” “even though,” “if,” “if only,” “in order that,” “in that,” “no matter how,” “now that,” “once,” “provided,” “rather than,” “since,” “so that,” “than,” “that,” “though,” “till,” “unless,” “whenever,” “where,” “whereas,” “wherever,” and “while.”

Exceptions: Use sentence fragments for stylistic effect. Examples: “The rape victim had the courage to testify. More courage than most people would have had.” “The witness’s testimony was consistent. Consistently false.” Use sentence fragments for commands. Examples: “Stop!” “Evacuate the building!” “Get out!” Use sentence fragments as a transition. Example: “First, the facts. Second, the law.” Use sentence fragments to negate: “The witness’s testimony was honest. Not.” Also use sentence fragments to answer questions: “Have you told us the truth? Probably not.”

10. “And” versus “To.” Don’t use “and” to show causality or in an infinitive phrase. Use “to.” Incorrect: “I went to the courthouse and got the judgment.” Becomes: “I went to the courthouse to get the judgment.” Incorrect: “Look and see whether the judge is on the bench.” Becomes: “Look to see whether the judge is on the bench.”

In the next issue, the Legal Writer will continue with a second set of 10 grammar issues. Following that column will be columns on punctuation and usage controversies.