COMMON ERRORS

Errors in Sentence Construction

* which abuse
  Relative pronouns, including which as well as who, whose, whom, and that, must have a
  clear antecedent in formal writing. Correct by rephrasing. Try a subordinate conjunction
  or gerund in the first clause. [Note: which, who, whose, whom may be used as
  interrogative pronouns; that may be used as a subordinate conjunction.]

  Wrong: All the men in Naomi’s family die from a plague, which leaves Naomi
  and her two daughters-in-law without means of support. [What leaves the women
  without support, the plague itself or the death of the men from the plague?]  
  Corrected: When all the men in Naomi’s family die from the plague, Naomi and
  her two daughters-in-law are left without means of support.

* naked this
  In formal writing, this and its related forms that, these, and those are considered
  demonstrative adjectives or pronouns. Therefore, they must be either followed by a noun
  or preceded by an antecedent (the noun to which the pronoun refers). The most common
  error is to use this as if it were a noun or to make this refer to an entire statement.
  Observe.

  Wrong: Boaz is an energetic and successful man, and Naomi knows this.  
  Corrected: Naomi know that Boaz in an energetic and successful man.

  The problem can almost always be quickly corrected by inserting an accurate noun after
  this.

  Wrong: Ruth has worked very hard to support herself and Naomi. This is
  admirable to Boaz.  
  Corrected: Ruth has worked very hard to support herself and Naomi. This
  devotion is admirable to Boaz.

* danglers (dangling or misrelated participles or infinitives)
  Verbals such as participles and infinitives must relate clearly to the rest of the sentence.
  Participles not part of the true verb and infinitives not used as nouns must modify
  accurately.

  Wrong: Drusilla approaches Bayard, wearing a yellow ball gown.  
  Corrected: Wearing a yellow ball gown, Drusilla approaches Bayard.

  Wrong: To prove his honor, several people attempt to supply Bayard with a
  firearm. (The people are not attempting to prove Bayard’s honor)  
  Corrected: Several people attempt to supply Bayard with a firearm with which to
  prove his honor.
Notice that a participial phrase tacked on to the end of a sentence should modify the last noun before the phrase. A comma does not suffice to make the phrase modify properly. Move the phrase or reverse the verb/verbal relationship.

Wrong: Ruth is admired by Boaz gleaning in the fields.
Still wrong: Ruth is admired by Boaz, gleaning in the fields.
Corrected: Gleaning in the fields, Ruth is admired by Boaz.

Wrong: Jonah takes passage on a ship to Tarshish, hoping to escape God’s command to preach in Ninevah.
Corrected: Jonah, by taking passage on a ship to Tarshish, hopes to escape God’s command to preach in Ninevah.

* confusion of singular and plural (agreement)
  Make sure that the verb is the same number as the subject.
  Make sure that a pronoun is the same number as its antecedent.

Wrong: Frederic is not one of the officers who teases the priest.
Corrected: Frederic is not one of the officers who tease the priest.

Wrong: Everyone in the court of Denmark seems to have given their allegiance to the new King, with the exception of Hamlet.
Corrected: Everyone in the court of Denmark seems to have given her or his allegiance to the new King, with the exception of Hamlet.

* tense shift
  Don’t change tense unless you have a reason to do so. Normally, use present tense for exposition and argument. Use past and future tenses to refer backwards and forwards from a single point, without shifting the focus.

Wrong: Hamlet leaves college in order to attend his father’s funeral but discovers that his mother’s remarriage follows soon afterward. When he hears of the ghost’s appearance, Hamlet is ready to believe the worst of both Gertrude and Claudius.
Corrected: Hamlet had left college in order to attend his father’s funeral but found that his mother’s remarriage would follow soon afterward. When he hears of the ghost’s appearance, Hamlet is ready to believe the worst of both Gertrude and Claudius.

* illegal possession (improper use or lack of possessive case forms)
  The Anglo-Saxon basis of the English language is evident in the changes required in nouns and pronouns to make them show possession (this process is known as inflection). The rules are simple but do require some effort to observe. Do not confuse possessive and plural inflections.

Personal pronouns are inflected to show possession by a change not using an apostrophe,
as in my/mine, thy/thine, his/his, her/hers, its/its, our/ours, your/yours, their/their (the first form is the possessive adjective, the second the possessive pronoun).

All other forms (including indefinite pronouns such as one/one’s) require an apostrophe to show possession.

Possessive singular is formed by adding an apostrophe and an *s* to the singular form. If the singular noun has more than one syllable and ends in *s*, the second *s* may be omitted.

Bayard Sartoris’ honor is affected by his heritage and his own conscience. No one in the court rises to Charles’s defense.

Possessive plural is formed by adding an apostrophe to the plural form. If the plural does not end with an *s*, an *s* is added after the apostrophe.

Bayard does not listen to his friend’s advice. (Bayard has one friend) Bayard does not listen to his friends’ advice. (Bayard has several) I found the deer’s footprints in my flower bed. (Singular and plural cannot be distinguished here—a limitation of the English language.) The *Book of Jonah* is more than merely a children’s story. (plural)

* stuffin’ and puffin’*  
Avoid the temptation to pad your sentences or to inflate the style with words like important, great, incredible, awesome. Do not claim many when you are prepared to cite several instances or examples. Do not use constantly when you mean sometimes.

All repetition is confusing in exposition, because your reader wonders why the material is being repeated or rephrased. Repetition tends to short-circuit the thinking process.

Avoid expletives such as *there*, which carry no information or meaning at all.

Stuffed: There are many reasons for Hamlet’s delay in taking action.  
Improved: Hamlet has several reasons for his delay in taking action.

Pretentious *it . . . that* constructions are also worthless.

Puffed: It is in the first soliloquy that Hamlet expresses his anger and frustration.  
Improved: In the first soliloquy, Hamlet expresses his anger and frustration.

* punctured by punctuation*  
Punctuation marks are as important as words to convey meaning. If you aren’t sure how to punctuate one of your sentences, consult your grammar textbook or your teacher. Don’t guess, and don’t assume that someone will always “be there” to correct your punctuation for you. You will find that correct punctuation is not difficult once you attend to the rules and guidelines instead of wallowing in self-pity or denial.
* meltdown (fragments and garble)

Yes, you may occasionally employ rhetorical fragments, but you have to know what you are doing. A complete sentence must have at least one independent clause, consisting of a subject and a predicate. Do not confuse verbals with true predicates. True rhetorical fragments are capsule statements that are not grammatically related to the previous sentence. Most inept fragments are broken off from the previous sentence. Garble usually results from poor proofreading.

Wrong: Hamlet takes several weeks to act on the ghost’s message. Time spent reflecting on the dilemma and testing the people around him.
Corrected: Hamlet, reflecting on the dilemma and testing the people around him, takes several weeks to act on the ghost’s message.

Garbled: Hamlet takes spent reflecting on the dilemma testing and people the him around before to act on the ghost’s message. [Flushable!]

* stringin’ along (inadequate subordination)

Sentences of more than three clauses are considered long, structurally. Sentences of more than four clauses require parallelism among the clauses. Study the first paragraph of *A Tale of Two Cities* if you are interested in how to construct very long sentences. Otherwise, bear in mind that two clauses joined by *and* are the maximum for most sentences. Professional writers tend to use more adverbial clauses than amateurs do.

Stringy: Jonah is awakened by the mariners, and he admits that he has offended God, but they are reluctant to throw him overboard, and the storm grows worse.
Subordinated: When awakened by the mariners, Jonah admits that he has offended God, but they are reluctant to throw him overboard until the storm grows worse.

* variety, tone, style

Make an effort to vary the structure of your sentences. Use introductory adverbs, subordinate clauses, inverted clauses, or verbal phrases to break up the standard subject-first sentence form. Pay attention to the feeling and connotation of words and phrases. By reading your theme or composition aloud, you will quickly detect tedious repetition, bad tone or sloppy style.

* bubble-gum transitions

This problem can occur between clauses, sentences, or entire paragraphs. The most frequent cause of stickiness is *also*, though any transitional adverb or phrase can become gummy from overuse. Used accurately, *also* means that the subject of the sentence performs another action, has another quality or another effect. *Also* does not mean *similarly, moreover, furthermore*, or *in addition*. Practice using a variety of transitions and cut back on *also*.

Wrong: Sam wants to find out what kind of person her father was. Also, she wants to understand why men like Emmett have trouble adjusting to life after the
Vietnam War.
Corrected: Sam wants to find out what kind of person her father was and also to understand why men like Emmett have trouble adjusting to life after the Vietnam War.

Errors in Paragraph Form

* Lack of focus, lack of topic sentence, arbitrary indentation
* Topic consisting only of a name, event, or single word
* Scrambled evidence, insufficient evidence
* Lack of adequate introduction and comment for quotations
* Improperly handled quotation (see quotation and documentation guidelines)
* Failure to cumulate or reach a point
* Lack of transitions between distinct points

Errors in Theme or Composition as a Whole

* Lack of interest in the topic
* Lack of original thought on the topic or in the approach - insufficient brainstorming
* Dull title
* Brief, formulaic introduction, failing to arouse interest
* Overlap with other paragraphs*Paragraphs in arbitrary order, failing to cumulate
* Imprecise or inadequate knowledge of the text or material - errors of fact
* Brief, “so-what” or perfunctory concluding paragraph
* Lack of required sections, such as final outline, work(s) cited page, rough draft
* Failure to proofread and revise (rough draft presented as if it were a final copy)