

Brief Descriptions & Examples of the Fatal Five

1. Subject-verb agreement error:

A subject-verb agreement error occurs when a singular subject is matched with a plural verb and vice versa. Subjects and verbs must agree in number.

Subject-verb agreement error example: I likes apples.

Subject-verb agreement error example: The boys in the band is out of practice.

2. Fused sentence (also called a run-on sentence) and comma splice:

A fused sentence occurs when two independent clauses are joined with nothing in between them.

Fused sentence example: It is a dark and cloudy day I will go home and take a nap. (The two independent clauses are “run together,” creating a fused sentence.)

A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses are joined with only a comma between them.

Comma splice example: It is a dark and cloudy day, I will go home and take a nap. (The two independent clauses are joined with a comma, creating a comma splice.)

3. Apostrophe Error:

An error in the use of an apostrophe occurs (1) when an apostrophe is used for no reason, (2) when an apostrophe is needed but is not used, or (3) when an apostrophe is misplaced.

Error in the use of an apostrophe example: The girl’s are having a lot of fun at summer camp. (Girl’s should be girls.)

Error in the use of an apostrophe example: Its hot today. (Its should be It’s.)

Error in the use of an apostrophe example: The girls shoe is untied. (Girls should be girl’s.)

Error in the use of apostrophe example: The three girl’s shoes are all alike. (Girl’s should be girls’.)

4. Confusing pronouns—Pronoun-antecedent agreement error and vague pronouns:

A pronoun-antecedent agreement error occurs when a singular pronoun is matched by a plural antecedent or vice versa. (The antecedent is the word, phrase or clause to which the pronoun refers.)

Pronoun-antecedent agreement error example: A high school senior should research their college options carefully. (Senior is singular, but their is plural.)

A vague or unclear pronoun reference occurs (1) when it is not clear to which noun a pronoun refers or (2) when a pronoun refers to a concept rather than to a previous noun.

Unclear pronoun reference example: The teacher gave the girl her book. (It is unclear whether her refers to teacher or girl.)

Vague pronoun reference example: Adding the proper ingredients is essential. This is the gist of the instructions. (This refers to the idea in the preceding sentence but not to any specific word.)

5. Incoherent sentences—fragments, misplaced or dangling modifiers, faulty predication:

A fragment occurs when a group of words is punctuated as if it were a sentence when, in fact, it is not a sentence because (1) it needs a subject, (2) it needs a verb, (3) it needs both a subject and a verb, (4) it is a dependent clause.

Fragment example: Runs down the street. (This fragment needs a subject.)

Fragment example: The teacher writing on the board. (This fragment needs a helping verb—is, was, has been.)

Fragment example: I found my keys. On the table. (On the table is a prepositional phrase and needs both a subject and a verb.)

Fragment example: Because it is too wet and cold. (This fragment is a dependent clause.)

A misplaced modifier occurs when a modifier is placed too far away from the word that it modifies. (A modifier is a word or phrase that modifies, or “describes,” another word.)

Misplaced modifier example: The movie did not appeal to the people currently playing at the theater. (The modifier is currently playing at the theater. The phrase currently playing at the theater is supposed to modify movie but is placed so that it seems as though it’s modifying people.)

A dangling modifier, which is similar to a misplaced modifier, occurs when a group of words is intended to modify another word that either is not in the sentence or is not clearly linked to the modifier.

Dangling modifier example: Currently playing at the theater, the people didn’t care much for it. (The modifier is currently playing at the theater. The phrase currently playing at the theater modifies movie, but the word movie isn’t present in the sentence.)

Faulty predication occurs when a subject does not work grammatically with its predicate (verb).

Faulty predication example: The most valued trait in a friend is a person who is loyal. (Because a person is not a trait, the sentence should read “The most valued trait in a friend is loyalty.”)