Appendix 2 – Common Errors – August 2010

A. Grammatical Errors

1) **ab** – avoid abbreviations in a formal report
   You may use i.e., e.g., and etc., as well as abbreviations for units of measure. In the text of the report, all other words should be used in full, such as the names of days of the week, months, streets, provinces, etc.

2) **ACR** – define acronyms the first time you use them
   If the acronym is a commonly understood term such as PC or LAN, you may use it without defining it. A useful guideline may be whether all readers would know the term. When you define an acronym, use the complete words first, followed by the acronym in parentheses. You may then use the acronym in the remainder of the report.

   - Example – incorrect
     SQL (Structured Query Language)

   - Example – correct
     Structured Query Language (SQL)

3) **ad** – adverb or adjective error
   Adjectives describe nouns; adverbs describe verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs.

   - Example – incorrect
     The computer runs slow. Run is a verb and must be modified by an adverb. Slow is an adjective.

   - Examples – correct
     The computer runs slowly.
     or
     The computer is slow.

4) **agr** – agreement
   There are two types of agreement errors.

   a) **Subject-verb agreement**
      Subjects and verbs must agree in number.

      - Example – incorrect
        The statistical information about the three companies are listed on the Web.

        Correct by changing the verb.
        The statistical information about the three companies is listed on the Web.

        ⇒ The subject of the sentence is “information,” which is singular; therefore, the verb must also be singular.

   b) **Pronoun-antecedent agreement**
      Pronouns must agree in number and gender with the nouns (antecedents) that they refer to. Note that “their” is plural and cannot refer to a singular noun.

      - Example – incorrect
        Each user sat at their own terminal.

        Correct by using his or her.
        Each user sat at his or her own terminal.

        i) Correct by making the whole sentence plural – usually a more elegant solution.
           The users sat at their own terminals.
• Example – incorrect
The company has decided to purchase new PCs for their employees.

Correct by changing or omitting the pronoun.
The company has decided to purchase new PCs for its employees.
or
The company has decided to purchase new PCs for employees.

5) art/pl – articles/plural
Note that “software,” “input,” “output,” and “impact” are not countable and should not be used in the plural nor with the indefinite article. “A software” is incorrect.

• Example – incorrect
The programmers’ inputs into the discussion were that the company should purchase new softwares.

Correct by removing the “s” from input and software.
The programmers’ input into the discussion was that the company should purchase new software.

• Example – incorrect
The department purchased a software.

Correct by rephrasing.
The department purchased a software package.
The department purchased a piece of software.
The department purchased software.

⇒ Generally, countable nouns do not appear in the singular without an article.

• Example – incorrect
Good employer motivate staff.

Correct by making the noun plural or by adding an article.
Good employers motivate staff.
A good employer motivates staff.

count/non-count nouns
Count nouns, words such as “marbles” and “computers,” are individual units. Non-count nouns, words such as “water” and “information,” represent entities or abstractions that cannot be counted.

The choice of accompanying word varies for count and non-count nouns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Count nouns</th>
<th>Non-count nouns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>singular = a marble</td>
<td>singular = water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>few marbles</td>
<td>little water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fewer marbles</td>
<td>less water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a number of marbles</td>
<td>an amount of water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not many marbles</td>
<td>not much water</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6) awk – awkward wording in the sentence
The sentence does not work and needs to be rewritten because the meaning of the sentence is unclear.

7) cap – capital letter error
Generally, proper names are capitalized, but generic terms are not. Be consistent in capitalizing technical terms. Avoid overuse of capitals. Nouns, pronouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives are capitalized in titles, section headings, and subsection headings; articles, prepositions, and conjunctions are not. Capitalize articles, prepositions, and conjunctions when they are the first word of the title, heading, or subheading.
8) **cont – no contractions in a formal report**
Use “cannot,” “do not,” “is not,” etc., instead of “can’t,” “don’t,” or “isn’t.”

9) **dm – dangling modifier**
Dangling modifiers are often the present participle of a verb (verb form ending in “ing”). These participles are not whole verbs; they require an auxiliary verb if they are used as the main verb in a sentence. The company is **purchasing** software.

When participles are used alone, they function as other parts of speech. Sometimes, they are used as nouns and are called gerunds. **Purchasing** software is difficult. “Purchasing” functions as a noun and is the subject of the verb “is.” Otherwise, they are used as adjectives and must describe or modify a noun, usually the subject of the main part of the sentence. A difficulty arises because participles are parts of verbs, and therefore, an action is associated with them. The noun that is described is also considered to be the “doer” of the action.

- Example – incorrect
  When **purchasing** software, an important consideration should be cost.

⇒ In this sentence, “purchasing” describes “consideration,” which is the subject of the main part of the sentence. “Purchasing” is a dangling modifier because “consideration” cannot be “doing” the purchasing. The phrase, “When purchasing software,” needs to modify a noun, and because none that makes sense is available, the phrase dangles.

  (i) **Correct by stating the “doer” of the action.** When a company is purchasing software, an important consideration should be cost.

  (ii) **Correct by making the “doer” of the action the subject of the main part of the sentence.** When purchasing software, a company should consider cost.

  (iii) **Correct by using the impersonal passive.** Many dangling modifiers that begin with “when doing...” can be effectively corrected with the impersonal passive. The “doer” is still not specified, but the verb is now a whole verb and no longer functions as an adjective.

    When software is **purchased**, an important consideration should be cost.

- Example – incorrect
  By using computers, the process can be streamlined.

⇒ The process is not using the computers, so the opening phrase is a dangling modifier.

  (iv) **Correct by changing the participle into a gerund.** Many dangling modifiers that begin with “by doing...” can be effectively corrected with a gerund. Because the participle now functions as a noun, it no longer needs a “doer.”

    **Using** computers streamlines the process.

10) **frag – sentence fragment**
A sentence must be a complete thought, not a piece of a thought.

- Example – incorrect
  When the company decided to implement the proposal.

⇒ “When the company decided to implement the proposal” is not a complete thought.

  **Correct by adding the rest of the thought.**
  When the company decided to implement the proposal, many managers objected.
11) inc – incomplete/inexact comparison
Do not use a comparative by itself.

- Example - incorrect
  
  Program A is easier.

⇒ easier than what? easier compared to what?

(i) Correct by comparing program A to another program.
  Program A is easier than Program B.

(ii) Correct by using the absolute form instead of the comparative.
  Program A is easy.

Avoid inexact comparisons.

- Example – incorrect
  
  UW's co-op program is larger than UBC.

⇒ compares the co-op program to the university

Correct by using “that...” or by using the possessive.
UW's co-op program is larger than that of UBC.
  or
UW's co-op program is larger than UBC's.

12) mixed – mixed construction
Avoid “is when,” “is where,” and “the reason...is because” ⇒ logically and grammatically incorrect

- Example – incorrect
  
  A bug is when code is incorrect.

a bug ≠ time (when) ⇒ faulty logic!
bug (noun) ≠ when code is incorrect (adverb clause) ⇒ faulty grammar!

(i) Correct by removing “when.”
  
  A bug is incorrect code.

(ii) Correct by substituting a verb that can be used with “when.” A bug occurs when code is incorrect.

- Example – incorrect
  
  The reason that employers make errors is because documentation is not clear.

Correct by rephrasing.
Employers make errors because documentation is not clear.

13) mm – misplaced modifier
Modifiers (adjectives, adverbs, phrases, and clauses) should be placed next to the words that they modify. If they are not placed correctly, they are called misplaced modifiers. Restrictors (only, just, primarily) must come immediately before the words that they restrict. Modifiers are like multipliers, and the following two examples do not have the same meaning.

- Example: $a + 2b + c + d$
  He only walked on the road.
This sentence means that the only activity he performed was to walk on the road.

- Example: \( a + b + 2c + d \)
  He walked only on the road.

This sentence means that the only place he walked was on the road.

- The first example is frequently used in informal conversation to have the same meaning as the second example. In formal writing, you must be more precise. If you have more than two modifiers, you need another sentence.

- Example – incorrect
  Windows is an operating system for PCs developed by Microsoft.

⇒ The author inadvertently states that Microsoft develops PCs.

Correct by placing the modifier where it belongs.
Windows is an operating system \textit{developed by Microsoft} for PCs.

14) par – new paragraph needed
A paragraph should discuss only one topic. The initial sentence, called the topic sentence, indicates the subject of the paragraph. When you change topics, you need to change paragraphs.

15) pass – ineffective passive
Use the active voice whenever possible, especially when the “doer” of the action is stated.

- Example – ACTIVE = SVO (subject, verb, object)
  The programmer solved the problem.

⇒ subject = doer, verb = action, object = receiver

- Example – PASSIVE = SVI (subject, verb, indirect object)
  The problem was solved by the programmer.

⇒ subject = receiver, verb = action, indirect object = doer
Both sentences are grammatically correct, but the active voice is considered stronger writing. The impersonal passive, which does not state the “doer,” is also acceptable.

- Example – IMPERSONAL PASSIVE = SV (subject, verb)
  The problem was solved.

⇒ subject = receiver, verb = action

16) prep – incorrect or missing preposition
Prepositions are connecting words such as on, to, for, from, by, with. They have a noun or a pronoun as an object and form phrases that function as either adjectives or adverbs. Which preposition is used in a sentence is determined by idiom, that is, by custom over time.

- Example – incorrect
  The department decided to publish an analysis \textit{on} the problem.

Correct by changing the preposition.
The department decided to publish an analysis \textit{of} the problem.

- Example – incorrect
  Information is shared \textit{between} three companies.

Correct by changing the preposition.
Information is shared \textit{among} three companies.
common error
between = 2
among > 2

17) ref – vague pronoun reference
Pronouns replace and refer to nouns. Which noun a pronoun replaces must be very clear, and the pronoun must refer to only one noun. Do not use the pronouns “this,” “that,” “these,” and “those,” or “which” to refer to a whole sentence or idea. Although, the meaning of the word “this” may be clear, adding a noun is never wrong and results in clearer writing. The same considerations also apply to the pronouns “that,” “these,” and “those.”

• Example – incorrect (use of “this”) ref
First, step A should be completed, and then, step B should be implemented. This improves the previous procedure.
⇒ The pronoun “this” refers not to one noun but to the whole sentence.

(i) Correct by adding a noun.
This method improves the previous procedure.

(ii) Correct by replacing the word “this.”
Following steps A and B improves the previous procedure.

(iii) Correct by rephrasing the sentences.
First, Step A should be completed, and then, step B should be implemented, thereby improving the previous procedure.

• Examples – incorrect (use of “which”) ref
The development team did not complete the program on time, which means that the project was delayed. Management reviews the budget each quarter, which means that it has a good grasp of the company’s finances.
⇒ The pronoun “which” cannot refer to a whole sentence or idea; “which” must refer to only one noun. In these examples, “which” refers to “time” and “quarter,” so the sentences do not make sense.

Correct by replacing the pronoun “which.”
The development team did not complete the program on time, so the project was delayed.
Management reviews the budget each quarter; that is, it has a good grasp of the company’s finances.

18) shift
Be consistent in using the singular or plural to refer to individuals or objects.

• Example – incorrect shift
Users are encouraged to call the help desk. When a user calls, the staff must respond immediately.

Correct by using the plural.
Users are encouraged to call the help desk. When users call, the staff must respond immediately.

Stay in the third person: he, she, it, they, and nouns. Do not use I, we, or you.

• Example - incorrect shift
You can quickly access a clickable Table of Contents.

Correct by rewriting the sentence in the third person.
Users can quickly access a clickable Table of Contents.

Avoid the imperative (second-person point of view).
• Example – incorrect
Correct by removing the imperative

… (Figure 1)

• Examples – incorrect

Note that the following results prove...

Consider the following results:

• Example – correct

The following results prove...

19) t – error in verb tense
Maintain consistent tenses.

• Example – incorrect

Word is popular word processing software. Microsoft developed it.

Correct by indicating the timeframe or by rephrasing the sentence.

(i) Word is popular word processing software that Microsoft developed in the 1980s.

or

(ii) Developed by Microsoft, Word is popular word processing software.

20) vb – incorrect form of the verb

• Example – incorrect

It is recommended that the company purchases two new operating systems.

⇒ After constructions such as “it is recommended that…,” “it is imperative that…,” and “it is suggested that…,” use the root form of the verb regardless of the subject.

• Example – correct

It is recommended that the company purchase two new operating systems.

• Examples – incorrect (missing or incorrect endings on verbs)

The company use to be located in Cambridge.

The customer can edits the program on his own.

The new software costed $12,000 US.

Correct by changing the form of the verb.

The company used to be located in Cambridge.

The customer can edit the program on his own.

The new software cost $12,000 US.

21) w – wordy or redundant
Be concise. Do not use more words than necessary to state the meaning clearly.

Wordy More concise

by means of with, through, by
due to the fact that because
for the purpose of for
in order for for
in spite of the fact that although
in the event that if
in the final analysis       finally
in the neighbourhood of  approximately
until such time as          until

Avoid “There is ... that/who,” “There are...that/who,” and “It is...that/who.”

• Example – incorrect
  
  There are many students who smoke.

  Correct by removing the extra words.
  Many students smoke.

red – redundant
An important goal in technical and business writing is brevity. Redundant words repeat the meaning already stated.

• Examples – incorrect
  
  Various different sources all provide the same statistics.
  The computer currently runs Linux.
  Employees co-operate together to complete the project.

  Correct by removing the redundant words.
  Various sources provide the same statistics.
  The computer runs Linux.
  Employees co-operate to complete the project.

22) wc – word choice
Use formal, standard, specific, non-poetic language. Do not use vague words.

Avoid informal language.

Incorrect
pros and cons
hassle
great
big

Correct
advantages and disadvantages
difficulty, problems, etc.
significant, excellent, etc.
major, important, serious, etc.

Avoid vague words.

• Example – incorrect
  
  The program cannot fix everything up.

  Correct by using formal, precise language.
  The program cannot solve all the problems.

• Example – incorrect
  
  Someone did something to the thing somewhere.

  Correct by using specific language.
  A user caused the computer in the IT department to crash.

a) affect/effect
“Affect” is usually a verb; “effect” is usually a noun. Helpful reminders are thE Effect = noun and Affect = Action.

• Example – correct
The effects of humidity affected the results.

b) allow for
“Allow for” means to make allowance for. “Allow” means to permit. If you can leave out the “for” and the sentence still makes sense, omit “for.”

Example – incorrect
The program allowed for the user to input the information.

Correct by omitting “for.”
The program allowed the user to input the information.

• Example – correct
The calculation allowed for the processing time.

c) set up, back up, log in
Some words are combined with prepositions. When used as nouns or adjectives, they are one word or hyphenated, but when used as verbs, they are two words.

• Example – correct
When the computer system was set up, the setup (or set-up) program was run.

d) than/then
then = next, than = comparison

• Example – correct
Then, the program showed that the sum was greater than its parts.

23) // – faulty parallelism
Balanced expressions (e.g., expressions with “and,” “or,” “not only...but also,” comparisons, etc.) and items in a list or series should be presented in the same grammatical (parallel) structure.

• Example – incorrect (not parallel: two nouns and two participles)
// She is responsible for stocking merchandise, all in-store repairs, writing orders for delivery, and sales of computers.

Correct by making all items participles.
She is responsible for stocking merchandise, repairing items in the store, writing orders for delivery, and selling computers.

• Example – incorrect (not parallel: infinitive and participle)
// It is easier to hit the computer than determining the problem.

(i) Correct by making both halves of the comparison participles.
Hitting the computer is easier than determining the problem.

(ii) Correct by making both halves of the comparison infinitives.
It is easier to hit the computer than to determine the problem.

B. Punctuation Errors

1) , – comma required
Commas should not be placed everywhere you breathe. Specific rules govern their placement.

a) Comma Rule One
Put a comma after introductory word groups, that is, phrases or other words that come before the subject of the main part of the sentence. This comma indicates where the main part of the sentence begins.
Whenever a message is received the computer plays the first notes of Beethoven’s fifth symphony.

⇒ “The computer” is the subject of the main part of the sentence.
Correct by adding a comma before the subject of the main part of the sentence. Whenever a message is received, the computer plays the first notes of Beethoven’s fifth symphony.

⇒ When the sentence is reversed and the main part of the sentence comes first, there is no comma before the subordinate clause.

• Example – correct
The computer plays the first notes of Beethoven’s fifth symphony whenever a message is received.

b) Comma Rule Two
Use commas to separate two complete sentences joined by a co-ordinating conjunction (e.g., and, or, but).

• Example – incorrect
The accountant conducted an audit but the president was not happy with the results.

Correct by inserting a comma before “but.”
The accountant conducted an audit, but the president was not happy with the results.

⇒ Note that, when two identical parts of speech (nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions) are joined by a co-ordinating conjunction, a comma is not appropriate.

• Example – correct
The high-speed printer and the modem are included in the purchase price. The programmers reviewed and modified the user manual to make it clear and concise.

c) Comma Rule Three
Use commas to separate items in a series. To avoid ambiguity, always place a comma before the concluding “and” in a series of three or more items.

• Example – incorrect
The student forgot to buy sugar, milk, peanut butter and jelly donuts.

Correct by inserting a comma before the last item in the series
The student forgot to buy sugar, milk, peanut butter, and jelly donuts.

⇒ The student wanted to buy four items: sugar, milk, a jar of peanut butter, and some jelly donuts (not donuts made of peanut butter and jelly!).

2) no , –no comma
Comma Rule Four
Do not put a comma between a subject and its verb or verbs.

• Example – incorrect
The main concern in implementing the proposal is the cost.

Correct by omitting the comma.
The main concern in implementing the proposal is cost.

• Example – incorrect
The manager decided to increase productivity, and called a meeting to discuss his plan.
The subject is “manager,” and its verbs are “decided” and “called.”

Correct by omitting the comma.
The manager decided to increase productivity and called a meeting to discuss his plan.

You may put two commas between the subject and its verb if the commas set off a parenthetical (extra) expression.

- Example – correct
  The solution, which was elegant, was very impressive.

“The solution was very impressive” is the main sentence. The phrase, “which was elegant,” is an extra piece of information and is surrounded by commas which function as parentheses.

3) **cs – comma splice**
A comma splice occurs when two complete sentences are joined by a comma. Comma splices are particularly common with the words “however” and “therefore.”

- Example – incorrect  
  The student slept in, therefore he missed his class.

  (i) Correct by using a semicolon.
  The student slept in; therefore, he missed his class.

  (ii) Correct by using a period and a capital letter.
  The student slept in. Therefore, he missed his class.

If the word “however” or “therefore” falls in the middle of one sentence, it is punctuated as follows:

- Example – correct
  The student, however, passed her midterm.

4) **; – semicolon**
A semicolon can be used as a quasi-period. It must have a complete statement both before and after it.

- Example – incorrect  
  There are two reasons for choosing this program; efficiency and expense.

  “Efficiency and expense” is not a complete statement.

  Correct by using a colon.
  There are two reasons for choosing this program; efficiency and expense.

  Correct by making the second part a complete statement.
  There are two reasons for choosing this program; it is both efficient and inexpensive.

  Note that this solution is not as elegant as the first because it is longer.

5) **: – colon**
A colon functions like an equal sign and means “and that is” or “and they are.” It is used at the end of a complete statement to introduce a list, a series, an illustration, an explanation, or an example. In addition, a colon follows a formal salutation in a letter (See section 3.3 in the Work Report Guidelines.)

- Examples – correct
  A teacher requires two qualities: patience and a sense of humour.

  The company’s management policies have played a large part in its success: the employees are highly motivated.
6) **lists**

If the lead-in to a list is not a complete statement, do not put any punctuation after it.

- Example – correct
  
  **The reasons are**
  
  1. 
  2. 
  3. 

⇒ This lead-in is not a complete statement and is, in fact, completed by the items in the list; therefore, there is no punctuation.

- Example – correct
  
  **The reasons are the following:**
  
  1. 
  2. 
  3. 

⇒ This lead-in is a complete statement and is followed by a colon.

Items in a list can be punctuated and formatted in several ways; be consistent throughout the report.

- Example – no punctuation
  
  **The study of mathematics will help you**
  
  • think clearly
  • solve problems
  • find a job

- Example – commas and a period
  
  **The study of mathematics will help you**
  
  • think clearly,
  • solve problems, and
  • find a job.

⇒ If one of the items in the list contains internal punctuation, the items must be separated by semicolons.

- Example – commas and semicolons
  
  **The study of mathematics will help you**
  
  • think clearly;
  • solve difficult, complex problems; and
  • find a job.

⇒ If the items in the list are complete statements, semicolons or periods can be used.

- Example – complete statements in a list
  
  **The study of mathematics will help you in the following ways:**
  
  • you will learn to think clearly;
  • you will increase your problem-solving abilities;
  • you will have a better chance of finding a job.

⇒ If the items in the list are very long, the lead-in should be a complete statement with a period, followed by a paragraph about each item.

- Example – correct
  
  **The study of mathematics will help you in the ways described in the following paragraphs.**

7) **’ – apostrophe**

Use an apostrophe to indicate the possessive.

- Example – correct (singular)
  
  The company’s employees...

- Example – correct (plural)
  
  The companies’ employees...
Common errors

it’s (contraction) = it is
its (no apostrophe) = possessive pronoun
PCs (no apostrophe) = plural acronym
PC’s (apostrophe) = singular possessive, e.g., the PC’s monitor
1990s (no apostrophe) = the decade

• Example – correct (no apostrophe)
  In the 1990s, the company purchased new PCs for its employees.

8) fs – fused sentence
Two independent clauses (complete thoughts) cannot be joined without punctuation.

• Example – incorrect fs
  Two new employees were hired both were former co-op students.

  Correct by adding punctuation.
  Two new employees were hired. Both were former co-op students.
  Two new employees were hired; both were former co-op students.
  Two new employees were hired: both were former co-op students.

9) h – hyphens
Two words acting as one adjective are hyphenated if they come before the noun. If they come after the noun, they are not hyphenated. Use hyphens to avoid ambiguity. For example, write co-op student, not coop student.

• Example – incorrect h
  The company purchased a state of the art computer.

  Correct by inserting hyphens between the words “state of the art.”
  The company purchased a state-of-the-art computer.

• Example – incorrect h
  The company’s computer is state-of-the-art.

  Correct by omitting the hyphens.
  The company’s computer is state of the art.

⇒ Adverbs that end in -ly are not hyphenated.

Examples – correct
  a well-regarded professor
  a highly regarded professor

Hyphens are optional with many well-known terms, e.g., object oriented programming, word processing software, work term report, etc. However, if you choose to hyphenate such terms, do so consistently throughout your report.

10) p – other errors in punctuation
a) Dashes and hyphens
Note the difference between a dash (–) and a hyphen (–) and do not substitute one for the other.

Example – incorrect p
  The well-known company has one major disadvantage–its remote location.

Example – correct
  The well-known company has one major disadvantage – its remote location.
b) **Quotation marks**
Use " " not ' ' and place commas and periods inside quotation marks.

Example – incorrect
I have prepared the enclosed report, 'LAN in the Workplace', as my 1B Work Report.

Example – correct
I have prepared the enclosed report, “LAN in the Workplace,” as my 1B Work Report.

**Exception:** refer to References (Section 3.10 in Work Report Guidelines)