

# Common Errors on Papers: Interpreting my Comments

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When I grade papers I encounter many errors that recur, both within a paper and across papers, and from semester to semester. This document will offer insight into what might otherwise be cryptic comments that I write by these errors. Alternatively, you can use this document proactively: avoid these common errors in the first place.

I have grouped the errors into two categories, grammatical and APA style. This categorization is somewhat artificial, because the APA manual specifies that writing should be grammatical, and the manual even mandates several of the corrections to grammar that I routinely make.

## Grammatical (and Writing) Errors

1. Split infinitive: “To boldly go...” is wrong; “To go boldly...” is correct.
2. “Affect” ≠ “effect.”
3. Nonparallel construction: items in series and joined by a conjunction should all be of the same form. “The rats liked to run, to jump, and eating candy” is wrong.
4. “Data” is a plural noun.
5. Noun-verb agreement: “A participant in one of the groups pick a card, any card” is wrong.
6. “Since” ≠ “because.” Use “since” only in its temporal sense, meaning “from the time when.”
7. “While” ≠ “although.” Use “while” only in its temporal sense, meaning “at the same time as.”
8. “Awkward:” if I write this near a phrase it means that the phrase does not read well - there is probably a better way to write it.
9. “Dangling:” I will write this if a participial phrase dangles (e.g., “Running through the maze, the researchers noted that the rats got faster.”)

10. “Unclear:” If I write this it means that your meaning is not clear (or that I had to work hard to understand it).
11. “2<sup>nd</sup>ary:” This means that a source you cited is clearly secondary — you should always use primary sources.
12. Ensure that everything that you cite appears in the references, and that everything in the references is cited.
13. Squiggly line: If i draw a squiggly line under something it usually means that I question the use of the word. It might be the wrong word, or it might not even be a word.
14. “Anthropomorphic:” I will write this if you are ascribing human characteristics to something that is not human.
15. Punctuation mark goes inside of the quotation mark at the end of a quote.

## APA Style Errors

1. Double space everything. There should be nothing in the paper that is single-spaced!
2. Use only one side of each sheet of paper.
3. Capitalize the running head.
4. Numbers: words or digits?
  - (a) All numbers linked to units of measurement should be digits.
  - (b) All numbers conveying how many participants (e.g., “a group of 4 participants”) should be digits.
  - (c) All numbers conveying percentages should be digits.
  - (d) After all of that, generally all integers between 1 and 10 should be represented by words (so the reference to “1” and “10” in the early part of this sentence is wrong).
5. Leading zeroes: if a decimal number is between 0 and 1 but could have a value of 1 or more then you must include the leading 0. A decimal number that cannot be greater than 1 should not have a leading zero: “0.5 or 1.0 mg/kg dose” and “ $p < .05$ ” are both correct.
6. Quotes: if you use a direct quote you must give its source, including the page number.
7. Do not use periods after metric abbreviations for units of measurement.
8. Identify other (i.e., non-standard) abbreviations the first time you use them (e.g., “conditioned response (CR)” or “dopamine (DA).”