Here is a list of subtle mistakes many Grinnell students make in their writing. Most of these errors are relatively trivial, but educated readers tend to notice such lapses and to think less well of erring writers. You can do yourself a favor by learning to recognize and avoid these errors.

**PUNCTUATION PROBLEMS**

**P1. COMMA BETWEEN SUBJECT AND VERB**
Never put just ONE comma between the subject and verb of a sentence. Two commas, to set off an inserted phrase like this one, are acceptable. Be especially careful when one subject has two verbs not to put a comma before the second verb. If you have used a long and complicated phrase as the subject of your sentence and are then tempted to set the phrase off with a comma, you should instead rewrite the sentence to make it less complicated.

**P2. COMMAS WITH NONRESTRICTIVE CLAUSES**
Nonrestrictive clauses are set off from the rest of the sentence by commas, but restrictive clauses are not. How do you tell the difference between a restrictive and a nonrestrictive clause? Either one may be a “relative clause” and thus begin with “who” or “which,” but the restrictive clause restricts the meaning of the noun it modifies in order to tell the reader just which one of a number of possibilities you are talking about. “The person who stole my Walkman should be drawn and quartered!” Here the restrictive clause (“who stole my Walkman”) tells exactly which person deserves torture. A nonrestrictive clause gives some additional and perhaps interesting information about the noun it modifies but is not essential to the meaning of the noun. “Kleptomaniacs, who are all too common around here, must be watched every moment.” Note the commas around the nonrestrictive clause. If you were to cut out the nonrestrictive clause, the sentence would still make sense.

**P3. SEMICOLON, DASH, AND COLON**
The semicolon is a tricky little punctuation mark with two uses; it can be a weak period or a strong comma. Used as a weak period, it separates two independent clauses, that is, two groups of words that could stand alone as sentences. The semicolon, in place of the period, emphasizes the close connection between the clauses. A semicolon acting as a strong comma separates the items of a list which includes phrases that contain internal commas. For example, you might write a story about Spot, a dog; Puff, a cat; and Hercules, a ten-ton spider. If you just want to set off a phrase from the rest of the sentence, do not use a semicolon; use a dash—like this. Note that the dash in type script is represented by two hyphens with no spaces. Some computer fonts now provide dashes—like these—which are twice the length of a hyphen. You should feel free to use them if your font provides them, again without any spaces before or after, While the dash is mainly used in informal writing, in formal texts writers prefer a more formal punctuation mark: the colon. Its usual purpose is to separate an item or list of items from the rest of the sentence, with the part before the colon pointing to the item or list which follows. The
trickiest thing about colons is that they only go at the ends of independent clauses. In other words, you should insert a colon in text only if you could end the sentence with a period at the same spot. Another tricky thing is that colons, like periods, should be followed by two spaces, not one.

**P4. COMMA SPLICE WITH “HOWEVER” OR “THEREFORE”**

“However” and words like it are not conjunctions; they cannot be used to link two independent clauses (groups of words that could stand on their own as complete sentences). Here are some fix-ups: 1) replace the comma splice with a period and start a new sentence with “however” or another conjunctive adverb near the beginning; 2) insert a semicolon between the two clauses; or 3) use an acceptable conjunction (and, but, or yet).

**P5. PLACING THE APOSTROPHE**

In most cases the apostrophe indicates letters left out. The possessive form, *apostrophe s*, is a shortened version of the Middle English use of “his” to indicate possession; “John his house” became “John’s house” when the “hi” was dropped. Eventually that same “s” came to be used with female nouns and plural nouns as well. Possessive pronouns, of course, have never needed an apostrophe. Thus, the possessive pronoun “its” has no apostrophe; the word “it’s” stands for “it is” not “it his” (? !). The other use of the apostrophe is in forming the plurals of single letters, abbreviations, or numbers written as numerals. “Ph.D.’s always get A’s on tests, unless temperatures are in the 90’s." One common exception to this second rule is that most modern writers omit the apostrophe in referring to decades. “College students in the 1960s were more radical than students of the ’90s.” apostrophe in “’90s” comes at the beginning and (numerals) left out.

**P6. USING A SLASH**

The slash, or “virgule” as grammarians call it, is unfriendly to readers. I counsel students to avoid slashes if possible in text, unless they’re quoting lines of poetry. Slashes slow the reader down and make your text look like a questionnaire or (horrors!) a government document. In our PC age, many writers are tempted to make a statement by using “he/she” or the like. A better way to get around the awkwardness of having to refer to unspecified individuals by gender is to make your subjects plural. Or else you can pick a gender arbitrarily the first time you refer to an unspecified individual and then switch the next time.

**P7. HYPHENS WITH COMPOUND ADJECTIVES**

When you string together two or more words to make a longer-than-usual adjective, you should connect the words with hyphens (as above).

**P8. USING ELLIPSES**

Ellipses are the three little dots for words left out of a quotation. Ordinarily, ellipses are typed as space-dot-space-dot-space-dot-space, like so: “My quotation. . . left something out.” Don’t run the dots all together, and don’t use the three-dots-crushed-together character from some
SYNTAX (Arrangement of words in sentences)

S1. DANGLING MODIFIERS
A participle is an “ing” or “ed” form of a verb that acts as an adjective or, in other words, modifies a noun. Sometimes the participle is the first word of a whole phrase that modifies a noun. The tricky thing about participles (and adjectival phrases in general) is that they need to be placed in the sentence as closely as possible to the noun they modify. If the noun being modified is left out of the sentence, or if another noun interposes between the participle and its noun, the sentence can be ambiguous and often very funny: “Walking down the street, a house appeared.” “Coming into the kitchen in the morning, breakfast was the first thing seen by my father, cooked by my mother, sitting on the table.” (This second example was crafted by a Grinnell student several years ago.)

S2. WORDINESS—“IT IS” OR “THERE ARE”
Sentences starting with “It is ...” or “There are...” tend to be wordy. One can almost always find a way to rewrite such sentences more clearly using about half as many words. For instance, “It is all too commonly seen that there are a wide variety of processes by which certain groups adjust and coordinate their members’ behavior...” becomes “Groups find many ways to change their members’ behavior.”

S3. WORDINESS—EMBEDDED CLAUSES
To make your writing more concise, get rid of little clauses—noun- verb or pronoun-verb combinations—embedded in longer sentences. For instance, you can rewrite “The sentences which he wrote were ones that were pretty hard to read.” as “His sentences were hard to read.” The tell-tale words “which” or “that” often introduce embedded clauses.

DICTION (Selection and use of words)

D1. AFFECT/EFFECT
“Affect” is almost always the verb and “effect” the noun. “X affects Y. X has an effect on Y.” Rarely, “effect” is a verb meaning accomplish—“X effects a change in Y.” Even more rarely, “affect” is used as a noun, psychological jargon for emotion—“In response to the intense electrical stimulation the subject displayed an elevated level of affect.” (Translation, “He got mad when we shocked him.”) As a synonym for emotion, “affect” has the same root as the word, “affection.”

D2. COMPRISE
The whole comprises the parts, not vice versa. “Grinnell College comprises North Campus and South Campus.” Do not use “comprise” as a synonym for “compose” or “constitute.”
D3. A LOT
In most academic contexts the slang phrase, “a lot,” is too informal. Avoid it! Writers who go so far as to make it all one word—“alot”—are betraying ignorance. There is an English word “allot” (with two I’s), but it means “to distribute or parcel out.”

D4. NUMBERS IN TEXT
Numbers under twelve, like “three” or “seven” should be spelled out in text. Use numerals for large numbers, like “17” or “1,368,432.” Note the following exceptions, however. Use numerals for small numbers you compare to larger ones: “Only 5 percent of elderly people now live in nursing homes, although 40 percent will spend some time there before they die.” Write out any number that begins a sentence: “Sixty-one percent of males but just 42 percent of females voted Republican.”

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