Summer 2006/Woodard

Top Thirteen Writing Errors

1. A comma always goes before a coordinating conjunction that connects two independent clauses.

Conjunctions: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so (“fanboys” acronym).

Independent clause: a word group that can stand alone as a separate sentence. An independent clause contains a subject and a verb (and sometimes a complement) and expresses a complete thought.

Example: Bill went to the store, and he bought a Coke.

2. There is NO comma when a coordinating conjunction connects an independent clause with a compound element that is not independent. In the two examples below, the first half of the sentence is an independent clause, but the second half is not independent.

Example: Bill went to the store and bought a Coke.

Example: I was tired on Friday but continued to run errands until I dropped dead.

3. Commas are used to separate parenthetical expressions (“asides”) in a sentence. In other words, any part of a sentence that is “secondary” to the grammatical construction should have commas around it.

Example: I was going to see Bill, who is one of my good friends, when the vicious pit bull attacked me.

Hint: The sentence should work grammatically, and be able to stand on its own, if you take out the “aside” and the commas.

1. An introductory dependent phrase/clause of four or more words must have a comma after it. If the phrase has fewer than four words, this is a stylistic choice that you get to make.

Dependent clause: does not express a complete thought and cannot stand alone as a sentence. A dependent clause begins with a subordinator (such as *who, when, while, if, that, although, unless*), and contains a subject, a verb, and may have a complement.

Example: Near a small stream at the bottom of the canyon, we discovered an abandoned shelter.

Hint: Notice that the second half of the sentence is an independent clause.

5. Use a comma between all items in a series.

Example: My uncle willed me all of his property, houses, and warehouses.

Example: The one million dollar inheritance will be divided between Bill, Susan, and Mary.

Question: In the above example what would be the difference if we deleted the comma after Susan?

6. A relative clause beginning with *which* must be attached to the main independent clause with a comma.

Relative clause: a dependent clause that functions as an adjective, that is, it modifies a noun or a pronoun.

Example: She teaches biology, which is my favorite subject.

Example: They were amazed at the painting, which was done by a young child.

7. Uses of the semicolon:

♦ Use a semicolon between closely related independent clauses. If the independent clauses are not closely related, choose a conjunction and a comma or write two separate sentences.

Example: My older brother studies law; my younger brother studies medicine.

Example: Poland was the first Eastern European country to turn away from communism; others soon followed.

♦ Use a semicolon between independent clauses linked with a transitional expression such as *however, likewise, therefore, thus, for example, on the other hand*.

Example: Many corals grow very gradually; in fact, the creation of a coral reef can take centuries.

♦ Use a semicolon between items in a series containing internal punctuation.

Example: Classic science fiction sagas are *Star Trek*, with Mr. Spock and his large pointed ears; *Battlestar Galactica*, with its Cylon Raiders; and *Star Wars*, with Han Solo, Luke Skywalker, and Darth Vader.

8. Uses of the colon:

A colon is used primarily to call attention to the words that follow it. Hint: Ask yourself if you can replace the colon with the words “that is.”

♦ Use a colon after an independent clause to direct attention to a list or a quotation.

Example: I need the following groceries: vanilla ice cream, Hershey’s syrup, and chocolate chip cookies.

Example: Consider the words of John F. Kennedy: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

♦ Use a colon between independent clauses if the second summarizes or explains the first.

Example: Faith is like love: it cannot be forced.

9. Parallelism means that each item in a list or comparison follows the same grammatical pattern. If two or more ideas are parallel, they are easier to grasp when expressed in parallel grammatical form. Single words should be balanced with single words, phrases with phrases, clauses with clauses. When one or more of the items violate readers’ expectations, a sentence will be awkward.

Example: I learned that there is nothing more important than being rich, looking good, and having a good time. (note how the verbs match: being, looking, having.)

Not: I learned that there is nothing more important than being rich, looking good, and to have a good time.

10. Its vs. It’s (an unusual case)

“Its” is a possessive pronoun. Normally, one uses an apostrophe to indicate ownership, but “its” is an exception.

Example: The dog licked its wound whenever its owner walked into the room.

“It’s” is a contraction for “it is.”

Example: It’s a perfect day to walk up the mountain.

11. Don’t end your sentences with prepositions.

Example: This is the book of which I was speaking.

Not: This is the book I was speaking of.

Why? Prepositional phrases function as adjectives or adverbs. When functioning as an adjective, a prepositional phrase usually appears right after the noun or pronoun it modifies.

12. “One” is a singular pronoun. The counterpart of “one” is “his/her” not “their.”

Example: When one has lost his or her heart, it is natural to be sad.

13. Simple is better. Concise language is a sign of good prose. Find the most direct and efficient way to express your ideas.