

The Official CELPIP Podcast

Episode 20 – Top 7 Writing Errors

1. **Verb tense consistency**
2. **Run-on sentences**
3. **Comma rules**
4. **Fragments**
5. **Adding descriptive details**
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1. Verb Tense Consistency

Writers must use the correct verb tense so readers can understand when the action is taking place. In other words, writers must decide if they are writing about events that happened in the past, the present, or the future. Although sometimes it is appropriate to use different verb tenses in the same sentence, generally, tenses should remain consistent when the writer is telling a story. If the writer mixes past, present, and future tenses together in the same story, the reader will be confused.

Here's an example of a poorly written story that mixes several verb tenses together incorrectly.

I travelled to Iceland in August 2015. I want to see the northern lights and saw so many beautiful waterfalls while I am there. I will eat moss soup, and minke whale steaks for the first time.

This story is about an event that occurred in 2015, so the writer should only be using past tense verbs. Notice how the writer begins the story in the past, but then shifts to the present tense, alternates between past and present, and finishes the story in the future tense! The shifts between tenses will undoubtedly confuse the reader.

Here's the same story retold correctly using past tense verbs.

I travelled to Iceland in August 2015. I wanted to see the northern lights and saw so many beautiful waterfalls while I was there. I ate moss soup and minke whale steaks for the first time.

2. Run-on Sentences

A writer must place an end punctuation mark at the end of a sentence to let the reader know when one complete idea is finished, and where the next sentence begins. If no end punctuation is used, the sentences run into each other, which is why this error is called a run-on sentence. When multiple sentences run together, usually the reader is overwhelmed at the number of ideas; without understanding where the sentences begin and end, the reader will likely not understand the writer's meaning.

Here's an example of a monster run-on sentence that combines four complete sentences into one gigantic sentence.

If I start writing and forget to end the sentence with a period and the next idea is added the reader won't understand how the ideas are organized so many ideas are crammed into such a long sentence the reader will be confused when they reach the bottom of the paragraph they won't understand what they've just read.

Here's the corrected version of the run-on sentence above.

If I start writing and forget to end the sentence with a period, and the next idea is added, the reader won't understand how the ideas are organized. So many ideas are crammed into such a long sentence. The reader will be confused when they reach the bottom of the paragraph. They won't understand what they've just read.

Periods have been inserted at the end of each complete sentence. (Note that commas have also been added to help the reader understand where to pause naturally within one sentence.)

3. Comma Rules

Commas are used in writing to show the reader where to pause.

i) There are many comma rules to remember when learning English, but one of the most common is to insert a comma between words, or ideas, in a list. Here are two examples of sentences that uses commas correctly to list ideas.

I'm going to call my mom, visit my nephew, and see a movie with friends this weekend.

The four planets closest to the sun are Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars.

ii) We also use commas when we create compound sentences. A compound sentence combines two simple sentences together like this.

We've learned about some common writing errors today, but there are many other grammar rules to learn!

In this example, the word *but* is called a conjunction because it connects the two simple sentences together. A comma is inserted before the conjunction to remind the reader to pause.

Tip: There are seven specific conjunctions that writers can use to create compound sentences. These can be remembered using the acronym FANBOYS. Each letter of FANBOYS begins one of these conjunctions. The seven conjunctions are:

For
And
Nor
But
Or
Yet
So

4. Fragments

Sentence fragments occur when a sentence is incomplete; it might be missing the subject, the verb, or both.

Here's an example of a sentence fragment.

Listening to music.

In this example, we don't know *who* is listening to music. The subject is missing, so the sentence is incomplete.

To fix the fragment, we need to identify the person, like this.

She is listening to music.

The young boy is listening to music.

Azin is listening to music.

5. Adding Descriptive Details

Interesting writing provides plenty of details so the reader can imagine the scene as they read. The sentence, "She is listening to music," is grammatically correct, but it's very simple. Who is *she*, for example? How old is she? What's her name? Is she alone, or with others? What type of music is she listening to? Where is she listening? How is she feeling?

“She is listening to music” can be revised to include these descriptive details. Here is one way to rewrite this very simple sentence.

The young teenager, Karla, is happily listening to jazz with her friends in Stanley Park.

Good writers take the time to include adjectives, adverbs, and other specific details in their writing to make their ideas more interesting for the reader.

6. Showing a Range of Vocabulary

To hold a reader’s attention, it’s important to include a variety of vocabulary words to avoid repetition. When a writer uses the same word or phrase numerous times in their work, it gives the impression that their range of vocabulary is quite limited.

Here’s an example of a weakly written passage that uses the same word repeatedly.

A couple of years ago, I taught my friend Craig how to ski because I’m an avid and experienced skier. So, he asked me to teach him. So, first I explained the basics: how to mount the skis onto your boots and strap them down. So, obviously I didn’t take him up to the highest peak. I picked a moderate slope instead. So, I showed him how to brake, and how to make the turns. So, he followed me after that.

Although this writer includes some descriptive vocabulary, like “avid skier” and “moderate slope,” they repeat the word *so* throughout the passage. To strengthen this paragraph, the writer must replace the word *so* with another suitable word or phrase. An example will be provided in the next part.

7. Transitions

Transitions are words or phrases that connect ideas together smoothly and help strengthen organization. They might be single words like *first*, *second*, or *third* that count off main points within a paragraph, or they could be short phrases like, *in addition to*, or *on the other hand*, depending on whether the ideas being discussed are similar or different.

The writer’s story above about teaching their friend how to ski can be improved by removing the word *so* and inserting a suitable transition to connect the ideas together logically. Here’s one way to revise this story. Note the transitions have been italicized for easy identification.

A couple of years ago, I taught my friend Craig how to ski because I’m an avid and experienced skier. *First*, I explained the basics: how to mount the skis onto your boots and strap them down.

Because he was a novice skier, I didn't take him up to the highest peak. *Instead*, I picked a moderate slope to show him how to brake, and how to make the turns. *As a result*, his skills improved. He followed my instruction closely *after that day*.

Improving writing skills takes time, energy, and patience, but making time to practice regularly will help you to write stronger, more interesting sentences.