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Grammar: What It Is, and What It Is Not

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In my role providing writing support services in the University of Connecticut's Center for Nursing Scholarship and Innovation, I often work with faculty and doctoral students in interpreting journal manuscript reviewers' and editors' reports. When researchers receive a revise-and-resubmit judgment, they need to understand the critique and undertake the appropriate revisions.

Often my coaching is stymied, however, by a comment that is as vague as it is inaccurate: "The manuscript has many grammar errors that need to be corrected." Usually, after reading the manuscript myself, I say to the author, "I find no grammar errors here. There are several mechanical errors, and a few places where sentence structure and style could be improved for clarity and emphasis. But no grammar errors."

Many nursing research reviewers (and sad to say some nursing research journal editors) cannot accurately diagnose grammar errors or other writing flaws. Let me use an analogy: Because I'm not a health professional, I hesitate to offer a medical diagnosis when a friend describes physical symptoms to me. Imagine if, every time a friend complained of an ache, pain, or discomfort, I offered the diagnosis: "Sounds like cancer." Similarly, not all writing problems are "grammar errors."

Here I want to offer a preliminary guide to the "health assessment" of writing, including the "diagnostic" criteria to make precise and accurate judgments, whether for yourself or others. To do so, I will distinguish grammar usage, mechanical usage, word usage (or diction), and sentence structure.

GRAMMAR USAGE

English is an old marriage of Anglo-Saxon (a Germanic language with multiple grammatical noun and pronoun declensions and cases, verb conjugations) and Norman French, a Romance language descended from Latin. Over the centuries of this marriage, standard or conventional English grammar usage has become more simple (and, as a living language, it continues to simplify). For example, our second-person pronoun *you* (which suffices for singular and plural and for most cases) used to have singular and plural forms, and different forms for use as a subject or an object.

The term *grammar* denotes the conventions for the forms of nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs. The subject of a sentence (a noun or a pronoun usually) and the predicate (verb or verb phrase) need to agree in number (plural or singular). Similarly, nouns and the pronouns that substitute for them need to agree in number and gender, while pronouns must also employ an appropriate case (nominative for subjects, objective for the objects of verbs or prepositions, possessive for possession). For example:

> *Florence Nightingale* [proper noun] **brought** [singular past-tense verb] specialized education to **her** [possessive singular feminine pronoun] work during the Crimean war, but **she** [nominative singular feminine pronoun] also devoted careful statistical attention to the outcomes. Nonetheless, the **physicians** with **whom** [objective pronoun (object of the preposition **with**)] she worked initially resisted **her** [objective pronoun], and **they** [nominative plural pronoun] did not appreciate **her** [possessive pronoun] assertive innovations. She **stands** [singular present-tense verb] remembered today while they **are** [plural present-tense verb] largely forgotten.

Another common grammar error among writers for whom English is not a native language involves the use of articles and demonstrative pronouns: definite article (*the*), indefinite article (*a*, *an*), and demonstrative pronouns (*this*, *that*, *these*, *those*).

So grammar errors are those related to forms of words and their arrangement in a sentence.

MECHANICAL USAGE

Standard formal writing employs a variety of surface features that convey meaning or modify words: **punctuation**, **capitalization**, **italicizing**, **underlining**, **bold face**. Proper nouns (e.g., people's names, brand names) begin with capital letters, while common nouns do not. Frequent mechanical errors include over-capitalizing and failing to use punctuation appropriately.

Apostrophes are often misused. For example, *it's* is a contraction for *it is* while *its* is a possessive pronoun. Apostrophes often signal possessive case nouns (e.g., *the researcher's method* [singular for one researcher] or *the researchers' methods*

[plural for more than one researcher]) but it does not signal plural nouns (i.e., *researchers*, not *researcher's*).

The mechanical usage of capitalization and italicization come into play with publication titles. With journal and book titles (and their articles and chapters) APA style employs *title capitalization* (the first letter of each word, except for prepositions and conjunctions) and *sentence capitalization* (the first letter of the first word of the title or subtitle, and any proper nouns). The titles of journals use title capitalization with italicization (e.g., *Nurse Author & Editor*) while the titles of articles use sentence capitalization (e.g., Grammar: What it is, and what it is not). The titles of books use sentence capitalization with italicization (e.g., *Writing in nursing: A brief guide*) while the titles of books' chapters use sentence capitalization in roman (i.e., not italic) type. (And in this case, the word "roman" is not capitalized because it is term in typography!)

Italics should also be used to denote when a term is being introduced or defined as a term; italics as well as bold face type can be used, judiciously, for emphasis.

Another domain of mechanical usage is manuscript style, including the formatting of a manuscript, its layout, and the style of its citations and bibliography of references (usually APA, AMA, or Modified Vancouver in nursing or other health research journals). Citation and reference errors are common, even with citation software, especially italics, capitalization, and punctuation of references (Nicoll et al., 2018).

WORD USAGE/DICTION

Word errors typically consist of four types: using a word whose denotation (definition) is not what the writer thinks; using a word whose denotation may be appropriate but whose connotation is not; homonym errors; and misspelling. You

may think that *cupidity* is a complimentary way of calling someone a romantic, but the word has nothing to do with the god of love; instead it means *greedy*. *Training* and *education* mean roughly the same thing, but most nurse educators prefer to call what they do the latter rather than the former. Among the homonym errors (words that sound alike) these are common: *there/their/they're*, *your/you're*, *its/it's*. Misspelling should be rare in a manuscript because word processing software like Microsoft Word highlights spellings it does not recognize, but technical terms may not be included in the software's dictionary.

SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Words combine to form phrases, and phrases combine to form clauses. A sentence can be a single independent clause (simple sentence), two independent clauses (compound sentence), an independent clause and a dependent clause (complex sentence), or two or more independent clauses with one or more dependent clauses (compound-complex sentence). Combining clauses can convey emphasis and relationships between ideas or information. Clauses are combined with conjunctions (coordinating or subordinating) or with punctuation (a colon or semi-colon). For example, here are four independent clauses:

> *Florence Nightingale took four months of training at Kaiserswerth-am-Rhein in Germany.*
>
> *She built her clinical leadership experience as superintendent at the Institute for the Care of Sick Gentlewomen in Upper Harley Street, London.*
>
> *She brought her education and clinical practice to bear in her work during the Crimean War.*
>
> *Many military medical officers were not initially supportive of her work.*

These could be combined in a variety of ways in order to connect ideas or to convey emphasis:

> *Because Florence Nightingale took four months of training at Kaiserswerth-am-Rhein in Germany and built her clinical leadership experience as superintendent at the Institute for the Care of Sick Gentlewomen in Upper Harley Street, London, she brought her education and clinical practice to bear in her work during the Crimean War. However, many military medical officers were not initially supportive of her work.*

> *Although Florence Nightingale took four months of training at Kaiserswerth-am-Rhein in Germany, built her clinical leadership experience as superintendent at the Institute for the Care of Sick Gentlewomen in Upper Harley Street, London, and brought her education and clinical practice to bear in her work during the Crimean War, many military medical officers were not initially supportive of her work.*

> *Florence Nightingale took four months of training at Kaiserswerth-am-Rhein in Germany, and she built her clinical leadership experience as superintendent at the Institute for the Care of Sick Gentlewomen in Upper Harley Street, London. Although she brought her education and clinical practice to bear in her work during the Crimean War, many military medical officers were not initially supportive of her work.*

Sentence combining allows the writer to show relationships, to emphasize an idea, and to provide rhythmic variety to a paragraph. In this example, some of these compound-complex sentences are longer than is typical in nursing research writing, which usually employs shorter demonstrative sentences. However, even with their length, they are not *run-on sentences*.

Sentence errors are of two types: a *fused sentence* (or *run-on sentence* or *comma splice*) and a *fragment sentence*. A run-on sentence combines clauses without appropriate conjunctions or punctuation (usually a semi-colon) while a comma splice combines clauses with only a comma but not a conjunction. A fragment is a clause that is grammatically incomplete:

> *Because Florence Nightingale took four months of training.*

> *Although she brought her education and clinical practice to bear in her work during the Crimean War.*

CONCLUSION

Grammar usage, mechanical usage, word usage, and sentence structure each constitute different aspects of writing, and thus different categories for errors. When editors advise authors to revise and resubmit, they should be clear about the precise categories of errors that require correcting. A single diagnosis of "grammar errors" does not suffice.

REFERENCE

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