What are megablunders?
Megablunders are the nine most common grammatical errors that interfere with the efficacy and clarity of writing. While some of them may seem obvious, even the best writers make these mistakes!

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Important Grammatical Lingo
The first step to learning about megablunders is becoming acclimated to all the grammatical jargon that we use in order to teach them. The terms are redefined throughout, but here they are in a comprehensive list.

- **Independent clause**: a group of words that contains a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought; a sentence. Ex: Jim studied for his test.
- **Dependent clause**: a group of words that contains a subject and verb but does not express a complete thought; cannot be a sentence. These clauses are marked by subordinating conjunctions (see below). Ex: *When* Jim studied for his test…
- **Coordinating conjunction**: words that connect two independent clauses together. There are seven: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so. A helpful acronym is FANBOYS! When the second independent clause in a sentence begins with a coordinating conjunction, a comma is needed before the coordinating conjunction. Ex: Jim studied for his test, *but* it was hard to concentrate.
• **Subordinating conjunction:** as mentioned earlier, this conjunction is what makes a dependent clause dependent; it is a word that not only provides a transition between two ideas, but also serves to reduce the importance of one clause.
  
  o List of subordinating conjunctions: after, although, as, because, before, even if, even though, if, once, provided that, rather than, since, so that, than, that, though, unless, until, when, where, wherever, whether, while, etc.
  
  o Ex: If Mary finishes her test on time, she will be able to hang out with friends.

• **Conjunctive adverb:** These adverbs connect two independent clauses, but in a different way than coordinating conjunctions do. Instead, these words require a semicolon before them and a comma after them whenever they are being used to connect two independent clauses in one sentence.
  
  o List of conjunctive adverbs: furthermore, however, meanwhile, moreover, nevertheless, therefore, etc.
  
  o Ex: The dark skies dissuaded Clarice from her afternoon run; moreover, she had thirty calculus problems to solve for her morning class.

✓ Note: conjunctive adverbs can also introduce, interrupt, or conclude a single main clause. In this situation, you only need commas to separate the conjunctive adverb from the rest of the sentence.
  
  o Ex: The young man is determined, nevertheless, to take her to dinner.

• **Antecedent:** this is a fancy word for “a thing—in this case, word—that precedes another.” Take the following sentence: President Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg’s Address in 1863. *President Lincoln* is the antecedent for the pronoun *his*.

• **Infinitive:** a verbal form consisting of the word *to* plus a verb (in its simplest “stem” form) functioning as a noun, adjective, or adverb.
  
  o Ex of infinitive as a subject: *To wait* seemed foolish.
  
  o Ex of infinitive as adjective: He lacked the strength *to resist*.
  
  o Ex of infinitive as adverb: We must study *to learn*.

• **Gerund:** a form that is derived from a verb but functions as a noun; a word ending in *—ing*. Ex: jumping, singing, laughing, skipping, etc.
1. Sentence Fragment

A sentence fragment fails to be a sentence in the sense that it lacks an independent clause—the basis of any sentence that contains a subject and a verb and can stand on its own.

- **Example #1:** In Japan, just before the last war and just before the armistice.
  - **Explanation:** This fragment lacks both a subject and a verb; while we know *where* and *when*, we don’t know *who* or *what* the writer is talking about or *what happened*.
  - **Solution:** In Japan, during the last war and just before the armistice, many civilians were killed.

- **Example #2:** Even though he had the better arguments and was by far the most powerful speaker.
  - **Explanation:** This fragment has a subject (*he*) and two verbs (*had* and *was*), but it cannot stand by itself because of the subordinating conjunction *even though*. We need an independent clause to follow up this dependent clause.
  - **Solution:** Even though he had the better arguments and was by far the most powerful speaker, he lost the case because he didn’t understand the jury.

2. Run-On Sentence

A run-on sentence has at least two independent clauses, but these clauses have been smooshed together instead of being properly connected.

- **Example #1:** The sun is high, put on some sunscreen.
  - **Explanation:** Two independent clauses cannot be connected with only a comma; the connection must also include a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so—FANBOYS) that relates the two clauses to each other.
  - **Solution:** The sun is high, so put on some sunscreen.

- **Example #2:** Mr. Nguyen has sent his two children to expensive colleges, however, he has sacrificed his health working day and night in that dusty bakery.
  - **Explanation:** In order to use a conjunctive adverb such as *however*, *moreover*, *furthermore*, and *nevertheless* to connect two independent clauses, you must have a semi-colon—or period—before it!
  - **Solution:** Mr. Nguyen has sent his two children to expensive colleges; however, he has sacrificed his health working day and night in that dusty bakery.

3. Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement refers to how the subjects of sentences must “agree” with the verbs that follow them; if a subject is plural, the verb must be plural, and vice versa.

- **Note:** The hardest part about SV agreement is remembering which nouns are singular and which are plural. *Each, everybody, neither, anybody,* and *anyone* are always singular.

- **Example #1:** Each of these hot dogs are juicy.
  - **Explanation:** The subject here is *each not hot dogs*; *of these hot dogs* is a prepositional phrase that modifies *each*. Try visualizing it like this: Each *of these hot dogs* are juicy. Since we know that *each* is always singular, the verb needs to change!
  - **Solution:** Each of these hot dogs is juicy.

- **Example #2:** All the books, including your really old one, is in that box.
  - **Explanation:** Oftentimes a clause that separates the subject (*books*) from the verb (*is*) tricks us into making a SV mistake that would seem obvious without it. If we pay
attention to what the subject and verb of the sentence are, we know that “All of the books…is in that box” sounds wrong.

- **Solution:** All the books, including your really old one, are in that box.

### 4. Pronoun Agreement

Pronoun agreement means that the pronoun must agree with its antecedent and vice versa.

- **Example #1:** Each cowboy and his horse drank their fill at the desert oasis.
  - **Explanation:** As we learned with SV agreement, *each* is a singular noun subject, so the sentence should be viewed like this: Each (cowboy and his horse) drank their fill. Then we notice that *there* is a plural pronoun.
  - **Solution:** Each cowboy and his horse drank his fill at the desert oasis.

- **Example #2:** Not only the handpicked flowers but also the homemade peanut butter pie will win Briana’s heart with their thoughtfulness.
  - **Explanation:** Notice that here we have two antecedents: the *handpicked flowers* and the *homemade peanut butter pie*. In a case like this, you must use the antecedent that is closer to the verb to determine if you need a singular or plural pronoun. Since *homemade peanut butter pie* is closer to *will win*, the pronoun that follows must be singular.
  - **Solution:** Not only the handpicked flowers but also the homemade peanut butter pie will win Briana’s heart with its thoughtfulness.

### 5. Vague Pronoun Reference

There are two kinds of vague pronoun references. The first occurs when there is more than one word that the pronoun might refer to. The second occurs when the reference is to a word that is implied but not explicitly stated.

- **Example #1:** When Lily saw her friend, she smiled.
  - **Explanation:** *She* is the vague pronoun reference; which word is the antecedent of *she*? Did Lily or her friend smile?
  - **Solution:** Lily smiled when she saw her friend.

- **Example #2:** Company policy prohibited smoking, which many employees resented.
  - **Explanation:** Pronouns such as *this* and *which* cannot refer to ideas or concepts. Here, *which* is attempting to refer to the entire concept that the company prohibited smoking. A more specific noun needs to replace *which*.
  - **Solution:** Company policy prohibited smoking, a policy many employees resented.

### 6. Misplaced Modifier

A modifier is a phrase or clause that describes, clarifies, or gives more detail about a concept. Modifiers should always be snuggled right next to the noun they modify. A misplaced modifier is when the modifier is placed too far away from the word it should describe and instead modifies a word it shouldn’t.

- **Example #1:** Churning in the Atlantic Ocean, we anxiously watched the weather report for information about the hurricane.
  - **Explanation:** Here, *churning in the Atlantic Ocean* modifies *we*. Even if we all know that the hurricane is the one churning—not the people—grammatically, the sentence makes us think otherwise. The modifier needs to be placed right next to the noun it is modifying!
7. **Dangling Modifier**

A dangling modifier, on the other hand, is a word or phrase that modifies a word not clearly stated in the sentence.

- **Example #1:** Having arrived late for practice, a written excuse was needed.
  - **Explanation:** *Having arrived late for practice* modifies the noun that comes directly after it, which in this erroneous case is *a written excuse*. Clearly, the written excuse isn’t the one who arrived late for practice—so who did?
  - **Solution:** Having arrived late for practice, Tommy needed a written excuse.

- **Example #2:** Without knowing the man’s name, it was difficult to introduce him.
  - **Explanation:** Who didn’t know the man’s name? The sentence says that *it* didn’t know his name. In this case, *it* is what we call a dummy subject: the word replaces the actual subject of the sentence, which in this case is the person trying to introduce the man.
  - **Solution:** Without knowing the man’s name, Mr. Sullivan found it difficult to introduce him.

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8. **Parallelism**

Parallelism is a balance within a sentence of similar phrases or clauses that have the same grammatical structure. The application of parallelism improves writing style and readability, and it’s thought to make sentences easier to process.

- **Example #1:** She likes to read, cooking, and jogging.
  - **Explanation:** This sentence includes a list that contains a mix of infinitives (*to read*) and gerunds (*cooking* and *jogging*). To make it parallel, the sentence can be rewritten with three gerunds or three infinitives; all lists must be comprised of the same kinds of phrases/clauses.
  - **Solution:** She likes reading, cooking, and jogging.
  - **Quick Quiz:** What is the other solution to this sentence?

- **Example #2:** I not only guessed where this person was shopping, but also the exact time of each transaction.
  - **Explanation:** With phrases such as “not only…but also” and “either…or,” the same part of speech needs to go after each word. Here’s an example: *not only, verb…but also, verb*. In this case, though, it’s: *not only, verb (knew)...but also, noun (the exact time).*
  - **Solution:** I not only knew where this person was shopping, but also guessed the exact time of each transaction.

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9. **Pronoun Case**

Pronoun case is the concept that some pronouns can be used only as subjects, whereas others can be used only as direct objects. See the following chart.
Example #1: Bob and me travel a good deal.
  o Explanation: This sentence tells us that Bob and me are the subjects. However, as we see in the chart above, me is not a pronoun that can be used as a subject. Take away Bob, and we know that me travel a good deal sounds wrong.
  o Solution: Bob and I travel a good deal.

Example #2: The matter is strictly between Joe and I.
  o Explanation: This sentence tells us that Joe and I are the objects of the preposition between. However, I is a subject not an object; we know that between I sounds wrong.
  o Solution: The matter is strictly between Joe and me.

Example #3: Pick whoever I tell you to.
  o Explanation: The easiest way to think about who/whoever v. whom/whomever is that, since who is a subject, they must be doing the action. In this sentence, though, I is doing the action.
  o Solution: Pick whomever I tell you to.
Final Thoughts

If you take the time to engage with and learn these nine megablunder errors, you are well on your way to becoming a better writer. However, in order to fully improve, you must not only understand these rules, but also develop a habit of checking for them in your own writing/editing process. These errors can often sneak up on us even though, in theory, we know they’re wrong. To help with this endeavor, here are a couple bullets of quick-and-easy steps to take when you come across a sentence that sounds suspiciously wrong, but you can’t figure out why.

• **Tip #1:** Underline the subject and verb of the sentence. Do they agree? In other words, are both of them either singular or plural?

• **Tip #2:** If you don’t know whether a noun is singular or plural—collective nouns such as team and family are tricky because they depend on the situation [when are these nouns not singular?]—there’s no harm in looking it up!

• **Tip #3:** If you can’t find a subject and a verb, you should probably ask yourself if the sentence conveys a full idea. If there isn’t a subject and verb, you have a sentence fragment.

• **Tip #4:** If your sentence sounds long and ramble-y, check for FANBOYS. Does a coordinating conjunction link together two independent clauses, or do you have a run-on?

• **Tip #5:** Check your pronouns. Do they agree with the nouns they’re standing in place for?

• **Tip #6:** Check your pronouns again! Is it clear which nouns they’re standing in place for?

• **Tip #7:** If you use a subordinating conjunction (however, therefore, moreover), is it connecting two independent clauses or interrupting a single clause? If it’s connecting two, make sure you have a semi-colon before it and a comma after it.

• **Tip #8:** Do your modifiers come directly before or after what you’re modifying?

• **Tip #9:** Whenever you use not only…but also, circle them. Then, underline the word or phrase that comes after each. Are these words the same part of speech?

If you want further explanations or practice, here are some wonderful grammar links.

The following include megablunder errors and other errors not covered in this document:

• **CUNY grammar mechanics**

• **Dartmouth grammar overview**

• **OWL grammar resource**

The following are links to a myriad of different kinds of grammar quizzes:

• **Grammar quizzes for ESL students**

• **Grammar quizzes for varying levels**

• **Grammar quizzes directly testing megablunders**

• **Grammar mastery test**

• **NY Times grammar articles**

A fun and interesting page full of articles about grammar!