

chicago manual grammar mistakes

chicago manual grammar mistakes are a common hurdle for writers aiming for clarity, precision, and professional polish. The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) is a comprehensive guide, and while its rules are designed to create consistency, deviations can lead to confusion or undermine credibility. This article delves into the most frequent errors writers encounter when adhering to or interpreting Chicago style, covering everything from punctuation pitfalls and pronoun agreement issues to verb tense inconsistencies and the proper use of modifiers. By understanding these common stumbling blocks and how to avoid them, writers can significantly improve the quality and professionalism of their work, ensuring it aligns with the high standards set by the CMOS.

Table of Contents

Common Punctuation Errors

Pronoun Agreement and Reference Issues

Verb Tense and Consistency Challenges

Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

Errors in Capitalization and Number Usage

Subscription and Subscription-Related Mistakes

Formatting and Style Nuances

Common Punctuation Errors and Chicago Manual Style

Punctuation is the backbone of clear writing, and the Chicago Manual of Style offers specific guidance that, when overlooked, leads to frequent errors. One of the most persistent issues is the misuse of commas, particularly in compound sentences, with introductory clauses, and around nonessential elements. Chicago style generally favors the serial comma (or Oxford comma) in a series of three or more items, a practice that helps prevent ambiguity, though some writers still omit it, leading to potential misinterpretations. Another common error relates to apostrophes, especially with possessives and contractions. Writers often incorrectly pluralize possessives or confuse the possessive form with the plural form of nouns.

Apostrophe errors are particularly prevalent with "its" versus "it's," a distinction that trips up even experienced writers. "Its" is the possessive form, while "it's" is a contraction of "it is" or "it has." Similarly, distinguishing between "whose" (possessive) and "who's" (contraction of "who is" or "who has") is a frequent source of mistakes. Semicolons, often seen as intimidating, are also frequently misused. They are intended to connect two independent clauses that are closely related in meaning, but writers sometimes use them where a comma or period would be more appropriate, or fail to use them to link such clauses at all. The correct application of colons,

primarily to introduce lists, explanations, or quotations, also demands careful attention.

Serial Comma Debates and Chicago Style

The serial comma, a comma placed before the final conjunction in a list of three or more items, is a hallmark of Chicago style. While some style guides and writers opt to omit it for brevity, Chicago Manual of Style strongly recommends its use to enhance clarity. For example, "I like apples, bananas and oranges" could be ambiguous, implying a single item "bananas and oranges." With the serial comma, "I like apples, bananas, and oranges," the distinction is clear. Overlooking this rule can lead to sentences that, while grammatically understandable, lack the precision and unambiguous structure favored by Chicago style. Embracing the serial comma is a key step in adhering to Chicago's punctuation conventions.

Apostrophe Misuse: Possessives and Contractions

Apostrophe errors often stem from a misunderstanding of their dual purpose: indicating possession and forming contractions. For possessives, the rule is generally to add 's to singular nouns and to plural nouns not ending in s, and to add only an apostrophe to plural nouns ending in s. For example, "the dog's bone" and "the children's toys." However, irregular plurals can be tricky, and indefinite pronouns (e.g., "someone's," "everybody else's") also require careful handling. Regarding contractions, writers must ensure they are correctly forming them (e.g., "don't" for "do not," "you're" for "you are") and not confusing them with their homophonous possessive counterparts like "your" or "their."

Pronoun Agreement and Reference Issues in Chicago Style

Pronoun agreement and reference are crucial for grammatical correctness and sentence coherence, and the Chicago Manual of Style provides clear guidelines that are often misapplied. A primary concern is ensuring that pronouns agree in number and gender with their antecedents. This means a singular antecedent requires a singular pronoun, and a plural antecedent requires a plural pronoun. For instance, "The team won its game" is correct, as "team" is singular and "its" is the corresponding singular possessive pronoun. A common mistake is using "their" as a singular pronoun, a practice that, while increasingly accepted in informal contexts to avoid gendered language, is still considered an error by strict adherence to traditional Chicago style unless specific inclusivity is intended and handled with care.

Another significant issue is pronoun reference clarity. Pronouns must clearly refer to a specific noun. Vague or ambiguous pronoun references can confuse readers. For example, in the sentence "John told his father that he was late," it's unclear who was late—John or his father. Chicago style emphasizes precision, so such sentences require rephrasing to eliminate ambiguity. This might involve repeating the noun or restructuring the sentence. The indefinite pronoun "they" can also be problematic when used without a clear antecedent, leading to a lack of clarity. Careful attention to these details ensures that pronouns function effectively to guide the reader through the text.

Singular and Plural Pronoun Discrepancies

The agreement between pronouns and their antecedents is a persistent challenge. Many writers struggle with collective nouns (like "committee," "government," or "family"), which can be treated as singular or plural depending on whether the focus is on the group as a unit or on its individual members. Chicago style generally leans towards treating collective nouns as singular unless the context strongly suggests otherwise. For example, "The committee debated its next move" (singular) versus "The committee members debated their next move" (plural). Incorrectly matching these can lead to grammatical errors and a lack of stylistic consistency.

Ambiguous Pronoun References

Ambiguity in pronoun reference occurs when a pronoun could plausibly refer to more than one noun. This is particularly common with "it," "this," and "that." For instance, "The report was critical of the policy, but it was well-received." What does "it" refer to? The report or the policy? Chicago style demands that such ambiguities be resolved through careful sentence construction. Rewriting to explicitly state the noun or to reorder the clauses can effectively eliminate these issues. A lack of clarity in pronoun reference forces the reader to pause and decipher meaning, disrupting the flow of the text.

Verb Tense and Consistency Challenges

Maintaining consistent verb tense is fundamental to clear storytelling and argumentation, and errors in this area are common, even within the framework of Chicago Manual of Style. The most frequent mistake is unintentional shifts in tense within a narrative or description. For example, a writer might begin a story in the past tense and then inexplicably switch to the present tense, only to revert back to the past. While specific grammatical constructions or stylistic choices might necessitate tense shifts (e.g., discussing a

historical event within a present-day narrative), these shifts must be deliberate and clearly signaled.

Another related issue involves the correct use of perfect tenses (present perfect, past perfect). The past perfect tense, in particular ("had + past participle"), is used to indicate an action that occurred before another past action. Misunderstanding when to use this tense can lead to chronological confusion. For instance, saying "She went to the store after she had finished her homework" is correct. However, saying "She had gone to the store after she finished her homework" is incorrect because both actions occurred in sequence, and the past perfect is not needed for the first action.

Unintentional Tense Shifts

Unintentional shifts in verb tense are a significant obstacle to coherent writing. In narrative writing, for example, a consistent past tense is usually preferred for recounting events. If a writer switches to the present tense for no apparent reason, it can jar the reader and make the sequence of events confusing. Similarly, in expository writing, maintaining a consistent tense—often present tense for general truths or descriptions, and past tense for specific historical events or findings—is crucial for clarity. Chicago style prioritizes consistency, and these shifts often indicate a lapse in careful revision.

Misapplication of Perfect Tenses

The perfect tenses can be a source of confusion. The present perfect (e.g., "has eaten," "have seen") often connects past events to the present, implying relevance to the current moment. The past perfect (e.g., "had eaten," "had seen") is specifically used to describe an action that was completed before another action in the past. A common error is using the past perfect unnecessarily when a simple past tense would suffice, or conversely, failing to use it when it's essential for establishing a clear chronological order of past events. For instance, "By the time I arrived, he had already left" is correct usage of past perfect. Incorrectly, one might say, "By the time I arrived, he already left," which lacks the emphasis on prior completion.

Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers in Chicago Style

Modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses that describe or limit other words. When they are not placed correctly in relation to the words they modify, they can create confusion, unintended humor, or outright grammatical errors.

Misplaced modifiers are those that are separated from the word or phrase they are intended to describe, making the sentence grammatically awkward or semantically illogical. For example, "He bought a dog for his daughter that was a poodle." Is the daughter a poodle, or is the dog a poodle? The modifier "that was a poodle" is misplaced.

Dangling modifiers, on the other hand, occur when a modifying phrase or clause does not logically or grammatically modify any word in the sentence. Often, these begin with a participle or infinitive. A classic example is "Walking down the street, the buildings looked tall." Who is walking down the street? The buildings? This is nonsensical. The dangling modifier "Walking down the street" should logically refer to a person who is described elsewhere in the sentence. Correcting this might involve rewriting the sentence as, "Walking down the street, I thought the buildings looked tall." Chicago style emphasizes clarity, making the correct placement and connection of modifiers paramount.

The Pitfalls of Misplaced Modifiers

Misplaced modifiers can drastically alter the intended meaning of a sentence. Consider the sentence, "She served sandwiches to the children on paper plates." This implies the children were made of paper plates. The modifier "on paper plates" should be placed next to "sandwiches" to clarify that the sandwiches, not the children, were on paper plates. Or, "He only ate the cookies." This implies he did nothing else but eat the cookies. If the intention was that he ate only the cookies and nothing else, the sentence should be "He ate only the cookies." Correcting these often involves moving the modifying phrase or word closer to its subject or object, ensuring a direct and logical connection.

Understanding Dangling Modifiers

Dangling modifiers leave the reader guessing about what is being described. For example, "Having finished the assignment, the television was turned on." Who finished the assignment? The television? The sentence needs to clearly state the subject performing the action of the modifier. A corrected version would be, "Having finished the assignment, I turned on the television." Another example: "To succeed in this course, diligent study is required." The infinitive phrase "To succeed in this course" suggests someone is performing the action. A better construction would be, "To succeed in this course, students must study diligently." The key is to ensure the subject of the main clause is the one performing the action described by the introductory modifier.

Errors in Capitalization and Number Usage

Capitalization and number usage, while seemingly straightforward, are areas where writers frequently err, especially when attempting to adhere to a specific style guide like Chicago. Capitalization rules in CMOS are extensive, covering proper nouns, titles, and the beginning of sentences. A common mistake is over-capitalizing common nouns that happen to be part of a title or a specific subject, such as "The History of the Civil War" where "Civil War" should be capitalized but "History" might not be, depending on specific title rules. Conversely, failing to capitalize proper nouns, such as company names, specific organizations, or geographical locations, is also a frequent oversight.

Number usage also presents challenges. Chicago style offers detailed guidance on when to spell out numbers (usually one through ten) and when to use numerals (for 11 and above, or for specific contexts like statistics, measurements, and dates). Mixing these styles inconsistently within a document is a common error. For example, using "five" in one instance and "7" in another for quantities that are conceptually similar can disrupt the visual flow and professionalism of the text. The correct application of ordinal numbers and the use of numbers in dates and addresses also require careful attention according to CMOS guidelines.

Navigating Chicago's Capitalization Rules

Chicago's capitalization guidelines are detailed and often nuanced. A frequent mistake is the inconsistent application of capitalization to titles of books, articles, and other works. Chicago employs "sentence case" for titles, meaning only the first word, proper nouns, and words that are part of a proper name are capitalized. For example, "The lord of the rings" would be incorrect; it should be "The Lord of the Rings." Over-capitalizing generic terms that are part of a specific name, or failing to capitalize distinct proper nouns, are common errors that detract from professional presentation.

Consistent Number Usage

The consistent use of numbers—spelling out small numbers and using numerals for larger ones—is a fundamental aspect of many style guides. Chicago Manual of Style suggests spelling out numbers one through ten and using numerals for 11 and above. However, exceptions apply, particularly when dealing with statistics, measurements, percentages, and ages, where numerals are often preferred for clarity and brevity. Inconsistent application, such as spelling out "twelve" in one sentence and using "15" in another for similar quantities, creates a lack of uniformity. Ensuring that all numbers within a specific category (e.g., counts of items) follow the same rule is crucial for

maintaining a polished document.

Subscription and Subscription-Related Mistakes

While not strictly grammar, subscription and subscription-related formatting errors are frequent in academic and professional writing, particularly concerning the Chicago Manual of Style's guidance on how to cite sources. A common issue involves the incorrect formatting of periodicals and journals. This includes errors in italicizing titles, abbreviating journal names incorrectly, and misrepresenting volume and issue numbers. Chicago style has specific rules for these elements, and deviations can make citations unclear or appear unprofessional.

Another area prone to mistakes is the formatting of notes and bibliographies. Writers often struggle with the placement of commas, periods, and parentheses, as well as the consistent use of capitalization within citation entries. For instance, the distinction between using full titles versus shortened titles in notes, or the correct order of elements (author, title, publication details), can be a source of error. Ensuring accuracy in dates, page ranges, and the inclusion of DOIs or URLs when necessary also requires meticulous attention to Chicago's detailed specifications.

Formatting Periodicals and Journals

The Chicago Manual of Style provides explicit instructions for citing periodicals, including magazines, journals, and newspapers. Common mistakes include inconsistent italicization of journal titles (which should be italicized) versus article titles (which should be in quotation marks), and incorrect formatting of volume and issue numbers. For example, a common error is "Journal Name, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 45-50." Chicago style would typically present this more like "Journal Name 5, no. 3 (Year): 45-50." Precision in these details is vital for academic credibility.

Notes and Bibliography Citation Errors

Errors in footnotes, endnotes, and bibliographies are pervasive. These often involve incorrect punctuation, such as misplaced commas or periods, or the wrong sequence of information. For instance, a bibliography entry might incorrectly place the publication date before the publisher, or omit essential details like the publisher's location. The careful arrangement of author names, titles, and publication information, along with the correct use of italics and quotation marks, are all areas where minor deviations can lead to significant stylistic errors according to Chicago's exacting standards.

Formatting and Style Nuances

Beyond fundamental grammar, the Chicago Manual of Style addresses numerous formatting and style nuances that, when overlooked, can lead to inconsistencies and a less polished final product. This includes the proper use of quotation marks, especially in conjunction with other punctuation, and the formatting of block quotations. Chicago typically places commas and periods inside quotation marks, a convention that differs from some other style guides. Errors in this area, while seemingly minor, can detract from the overall professional appearance of a document.

Another area of frequent confusion is the use of hyphens, en dashes, and em dashes. These punctuation marks have distinct functions. Hyphens are used to join words, en dashes typically indicate a range, and em dashes are used for parenthetical interruptions or to set off clauses. Misusing these can lead to awkward phrasing or ambiguity. The consistent formatting of numbers, dates, and measurements, including the use of spaces around them, also falls under these stylistic nuances. Adhering to Chicago's specific rules in these details demonstrates a high level of editorial care and attention to the craft of writing.

Quotation Marks and Punctuation Placement

The placement of punctuation relative to quotation marks is a common point of contention and error. Chicago Manual of Style generally dictates that periods and commas go inside closing quotation marks, regardless of whether they are part of the quoted material. For example, "He said, 'I am leaving.'" is correct. Colons and semicolons, however, are placed outside the quotation marks unless they are part of the original quotation. Errors here can be jarring to readers familiar with different conventions. Proper handling of question marks and exclamation points also depends on whether they are part of the quoted material.

Dashes, Hyphens, and Parentheses

The correct usage of hyphens, en dashes, and em dashes is a nuanced aspect of Chicago style that often leads to mistakes. A hyphen connects words to form compound terms (e.g., "well-being"). An en dash, typographically distinct, is used to indicate a range (e.g., "pages 5–10") or a connection between two names (e.g., "the Chicago–New York flight"). An em dash is primarily used for emphasis or to set off an explanatory phrase, similar to parentheses but more forceful (e.g., "The answer—if indeed there was one—remained elusive"). Confusion between these marks, or using hyphens in place of dashes, is a frequent stylistic slip.

Formatting Numbers, Dates, and Measurements

The precise formatting of numbers, dates, and measurements according to Chicago style contributes significantly to a document's professionalism. This includes consistency in spelling out small numbers and using numerals for larger ones, as previously discussed. For dates, Chicago typically prefers "Month Day, Year" (e.g., "July 4, 1776") without a comma between the month and day, but with a comma after the day when the year is included in the middle of a sentence. Measurements often require specific units and consistent notation. For example, using "10 kg" or "10-kg weight" depends on context and the specific rules for compound modifiers.

FAQ

Q: What is the most common grammar mistake that writers make when following the Chicago Manual of Style?

A: One of the most frequently encountered grammar mistakes is the incorrect or inconsistent use of commas, particularly regarding the serial comma (Oxford comma) and commas around nonessential clauses.

Q: How does Chicago Manual of Style address pronoun agreement with gender-neutral language?

A: Chicago Manual of Style acknowledges the evolving use of singular "they" for gender-neutral pronouns. While traditional rules favor "he or she," Chicago permits singular "they" when necessary for clarity or to avoid awkward phrasing, provided it is used consistently and consciously.

Q: What is the difference between a misplaced and a dangling modifier according to Chicago style?

A: A misplaced modifier is a word or phrase that is separated from the word or phrase it is intended to modify, leading to confusion about meaning. A dangling modifier is a phrase or clause that does not logically or grammatically modify any word in the sentence, often leaving the intended subject unclear.

Q: When should I use numerals versus spelling out

numbers in Chicago style?

A: Generally, Chicago Manual of Style recommends spelling out numbers one through ten and using numerals for 11 and above. However, exceptions apply for statistics, measurements, percentages, ages, and other specific contexts where numerals enhance clarity and consistency.

Q: Are there specific rules in Chicago Manual of Style for italicizing titles?

A: Yes, Chicago Manual of Style has detailed rules for italicizing titles. Book titles, journal titles, movie titles, and other major works are typically italicized. Titles of shorter works, such as articles, essays, or poems, are usually enclosed in quotation marks.

Q: What are common errors in Chicago-style citation formatting?

A: Common errors in Chicago-style citations include incorrect punctuation, inconsistent capitalization within entries, improper use of italics for titles, and misformatting of volume and issue numbers for periodicals.

Q: How does Chicago Manual of Style handle em dashes and hyphens?

A: Chicago Manual of Style distinguishes between hyphens (used to join words, e.g., "state-of-the-art"), en dashes (used for ranges, e.g., "pp. 25–30"), and em dashes (used for interruptions or emphasis, e.g., "The answer—unexpectedly—was found"). Misusing these marks is a frequent error.

Q: Is it acceptable to use contractions in writing governed by the Chicago Manual of Style?

A: The acceptability of contractions depends on the tone and purpose of the writing. For formal academic or professional prose, contractions are generally avoided. However, for less formal writing or when quoting dialogue, contractions are perfectly acceptable. Chicago style itself uses contractions within its text.

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