

chicago manual of style common errors

chicago manual of style common errors are a frequent concern for writers, editors, and academics striving for precision and adherence to a widely respected style guide. Navigating the intricacies of The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) can be challenging, and even seasoned professionals may stumble over its nuanced rules. This comprehensive article delves into the most prevalent mistakes people make when applying CMOS, offering clear explanations and practical solutions. We will explore common pitfalls in punctuation, grammar, citations, and formatting, providing insights to help you elevate your writing and ensure compliance with this authoritative style manual. Understanding these frequent errors is crucial for producing polished, professional documents that meet the highest editorial standards.

- Punctuation Pitfalls
- Grammatical Gaffes
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Punctuation Pitfalls in Chicago Style

Punctuation is often a minefield in academic and professional writing, and the Chicago Manual of Style has specific guidelines that can trip up even diligent writers. One of the most common errors involves the use of the serial comma, also known as the Oxford comma. While CMOS generally recommends its use for clarity, many writers, influenced by other style guides, omit it. This can lead to ambiguity in lists where the items themselves might contain conjunctions or appear to form a single unit without the serial comma. For instance, "I love my parents, Lady Gaga and Humpty Dumpty" is ambiguous without the serial comma; "I love my parents, Lady Gaga, and Humpty Dumpty" clarifies that Lady Gaga and Humpty Dumpty are separate entities.

Another frequent punctuation error relates to the placement of punctuation with quotation marks. Chicago style typically places periods and commas inside quotation marks, regardless of whether they are part of the quoted material. Colons and semicolons, however, are placed outside quotation marks unless they are part of the quoted material itself. Misunderstanding this rule can lead to improperly punctuated dialogue or quoted phrases.

Apostrophe Aberrations

Apostrophes are notoriously tricky, and CMOS common errors in this area often involve possessives and contractions. For singular nouns, forming the possessive generally involves adding 's (e.g., "the student's book"). For plural nouns ending in s, the possessive is formed by adding an apostrophe only (e.g., "the students' books"). Irregular plurals require an apostrophe and s (e.g., "the children's toys"). The confusion often arises with proper nouns ending in s, where Chicago style allows for either the 's addition or just the apostrophe, depending on pronunciation, though the 's is often preferred for clarity.

Contractions, such as "it's" for "it is" or "its" for the possessive pronoun, are another source of error. Many writers incorrectly use "it's" when they mean the possessive "its," which has no apostrophe. Similarly, confusion between "who's" (who is/has) and "whose" (possessive) is rampant. CMOS generally discourages contractions in formal academic writing, but understanding their correct formation is still essential when they appear in quoted material or less formal contexts.

Dash Dilemmas

Chicago style differentiates between hyphens, en dashes, and em dashes, and their misuse is a common oversight. A hyphen joins words or parts of words (e.g., "state-of-the-art"). An en dash is typically used to indicate a range (e.g., "pages 5–10," "June–August") or to connect a prefix to a proper noun (e.g., "pre-Columbian"). An em dash, often set off with spaces in some styles but without spaces in Chicago (unless a specific stylistic choice dictates otherwise), is used for an abrupt break in thought, an aside, or to set off a parenthetical element more emphatically than commas or parentheses. Many writers use a single hyphen for all these purposes, failing to achieve the distinct visual and grammatical functions of the en and em dashes.

Grammatical Gaffes in Chicago Style

Beyond punctuation, grammatical errors are frequently encountered when applying CMOS. Subject-verb agreement is a fundamental rule that can be surprisingly challenging, especially with complex sentence structures or intervening phrases. For example, a sentence like "The committee, which has been meeting for hours, are preparing their final recommendations" is grammatically incorrect. The subject is "committee" (singular), so the verb should be "is."

Another common issue is pronoun-antecedent agreement. A pronoun must clearly refer to its antecedent, and both must agree in number and gender. Errors occur when an antecedent is vague, implied, or when the pronoun clashes in number. For instance, "Every student should bring their own supplies" is a common construction that CMOS would flag. Since "every student" is singular, the pronoun should also be singular: "Every student should bring his or her

own supplies" (though many modern style guides encourage singular "they" for gender neutrality when appropriate, CMOS allows this in specific contexts and often suggests rephrasing for clarity).

Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

Modifiers are words or phrases that describe or add detail. A misplaced modifier is placed incorrectly, leading to unintended meanings, while a dangling modifier lacks a clear subject to modify. For example, "Walking down the street, the tall buildings amazed me" is a dangling modifier because it implies the buildings were walking. A corrected version would be: "Walking down the street, I was amazed by the tall buildings." These errors, while perhaps minor in casual conversation, detract significantly from the clarity and professionalism expected in formal writing governed by CMOS.

Parallelism Problems

Parallelism, or parallel structure, is crucial for clarity and rhythm in writing, especially in lists or series. Items in a series should be in the same grammatical form. For instance, "She likes to read, to write, and to paint" is parallel. An error would be: "She likes reading, to write, and painting." Chicago style emphasizes the importance of maintaining consistent grammatical structure for readability and logical flow, particularly in academic papers and formal reports.

Citation and Referencing Errors in Chicago Style

Perhaps one of the most detailed and often misunderstood areas of Chicago style is its comprehensive system of citations and referencing. Errors here can range from minor formatting inconsistencies to entirely incorrect citation formats, which can undermine the credibility of a scholarly work.

CMOS offers two primary citation systems: the notes-bibliography system and the author-date system. A very common error is mixing elements of these two systems or incorrectly applying one within the framework of the other. For example, using author-date citations in the text but then attempting to format the bibliography according to notes-bibliography guidelines, or vice versa.

Notes-Bibliography System Slip-ups

Within the notes-bibliography system, frequent errors involve the formatting of notes and the bibliography. For endnotes and footnotes, inaccuracies in including all necessary bibliographic information (author, title, publication details, page number) are common. The precise punctuation, capitalization,

and order of elements within a note are crucial and often vary by source type (book, journal article, website). Similarly, the bibliography, while summarizing the notes, has its own distinct formatting rules for each source type that can be easily confused. For instance, the placement of publication dates, the use of italics for titles, and the inclusion of specific details like URLs and access dates for online sources are all potential error points.

Author-Date System Ailments

The author-date system, while seemingly simpler for in-text citations (e.g., Smith 2020, 45), also presents common errors. Misattributing sources due to incorrect author names or publication years is a significant problem. Furthermore, the corresponding reference list (not called a bibliography) requires strict adherence to format for each source type, mirroring many of the complexities found in the bibliography of the notes-system. Ensuring the page numbers or specific locations are correctly cited in both the in-text citation and the reference list entry is vital.

Consistency is Key

Perhaps the overarching citation error is a lack of consistency. Even if individual citations are mostly correct, minor variations in formatting across different entries can signal carelessness to a reader or editor. Meticulously following Chicago's guidelines for each specific source type and ensuring uniformity throughout the document is paramount to avoiding these common errors.

Formatting Fumbles in Chicago Style

Beyond the core text and citations, the physical presentation of a document according to Chicago style involves several formatting considerations that can lead to errors. These often relate to headings, tables, figures, and the overall layout of the manuscript.

Headings and subheadings provide structure and guide the reader. Chicago offers flexibility, but consistency in hierarchical levels, capitalization, and punctuation is essential. Using different formatting styles for similar levels of subheadings (e.g., bolding one and italicizing another for the same level) or inconsistent capitalization (e.g., title case for one and sentence case for another) are common mistakes.

Tables and Figures

Presenting data visually through tables and figures requires careful attention to Chicago's guidelines. Errors can include incorrect numbering and titling of tables and figures, improper placement of these elements within

the text, and inconsistent formatting of the content within them (e.g., inconsistent alignment, font usage, or inclusion of units of measurement). CMOS provides specific instructions on how to label, caption, and design tables and figures to ensure they are clear and easily understood.

Manuscript Preparation Quirks

For manuscripts intended for publication, Chicago has detailed rules for preparation, covering aspects like pagination, line spacing, margins, and the formatting of preliminary pages (title page, abstract, table of contents). Deviating from these standards, even subtly, can be considered an error. For example, incorrect placement of page numbers, inconsistent spacing between paragraphs, or improper formatting of the table of contents can all detract from a professional presentation.

Specialized Chicago Style Challenges

Beyond the general rules, certain specialized areas within Chicago style present unique challenges and are frequent sources of errors for writers. These often require a deeper dive into the manual and a more nuanced understanding of specific contexts.

One such area is the handling of foreign languages and terms. While CMOS provides guidance on italicizing foreign words, handling diacritics, and providing translations, many writers struggle with consistency and accuracy. For instance, deciding whether a term has become common enough in English to forgo italics, or correctly rendering accents and other special characters, requires careful attention to detail and often consultation with specialized dictionaries or resources.

Editorials and Permissions

For works that involve editorial notes or require permissions for copyrighted material, Chicago style offers specific recommendations. Errors can arise from improperly formatting these notes or failing to provide the necessary information for permissions requests. The correct way to credit sources, acknowledge permissions, and use editorial symbols are all areas where precision is key.

Indexing and Bibliographic Entries

While not always directly handled by the author, understanding the principles behind Chicago's indexing and bibliographic entry creation can help writers anticipate editorial needs. Errors in these areas, if they originate from the author's manuscript (e.g., poor cross-referencing or unclear terminology), can indirectly reflect on the author's attention to detail. For instance, a

poorly constructed index that is difficult to navigate can stem from inconsistencies in how terms are presented throughout the text.

Navigating the complexities of The Chicago Manual of Style requires diligence and a commitment to detail. By understanding these common errors related to punctuation, grammar, citations, and formatting, writers can significantly improve the clarity, accuracy, and professionalism of their work. Consulting the manual regularly and paying close attention to its specific guidelines for your particular source types and writing context are the best defenses against these frequent pitfalls.

FAQ

Q: What is the most common error writers make when using the serial comma in Chicago style?

A: The most common error is omitting the serial (or Oxford) comma when it is recommended by CMOS for clarity. This often happens when writers are influenced by other style guides or when they perceive the items in a list as a cohesive unit, leading to potential ambiguity.

Q: How does Chicago style handle apostrophes in possessive nouns, and what are common mistakes?

A: Chicago style generally adds 's to singular nouns and plurals not ending in s (e.g., "child's," "women's"). For plurals ending in s, it adds only an apostrophe (e.g., "students'"). Common mistakes include incorrectly forming possessives for irregular plurals, using an apostrophe in the possessive pronoun "its," and confusion between "who's" and "whose."

Q: What is the difference between an en dash and an em dash in Chicago style, and why is this distinction often missed?

A: An en dash typically indicates a range (e.g., "May–June") or connects elements that are already hyphenated. An em dash is used for breaks in thought or emphatic parentheticals. The distinction is often missed because many writers use a single hyphen for all these purposes, failing to recognize the distinct functions and appearances of the en and em dashes in formal typography.

Q: Can you explain a common error related to

pronoun-antecedent agreement in Chicago style?

A: A very common error is using a plural pronoun with a singular antecedent, especially when the antecedent is a distributive singular pronoun like "every" or "each." For example, "Every student must bring their lunch" is incorrect according to strict CMOS rules, which would prefer "Every student must bring his or her lunch" or rephrasing.

Q: What is a frequent mistake in the notes-bibliography citation system of Chicago style?

A: A frequent mistake in the notes-bibliography system is inconsistency in the formatting of notes and bibliography entries. Writers often err in the precise order of information, punctuation, and capitalization for different source types (books, articles, websites), or they may omit essential details like page numbers in notes or specific publication information in the bibliography.

Q: What is a common issue with the author-date system in Chicago style?

A: A common issue with the author-date system is ensuring that the in-text citations accurately reflect the corresponding entries in the reference list. This includes matching author names, publication years, and often page numbers precisely, as well as adhering to the specific formatting requirements for each source type in the reference list.

Q: Why is consistency in formatting particularly important in Chicago style for academic papers?

A: Consistency in formatting is crucial because it demonstrates attention to detail and professionalism, which are highly valued in academic and scholarly work. Inconsistencies can distract readers, suggest carelessness, and undermine the credibility of the author's research and writing.

Q: What is a frequent error in handling foreign languages and terms according to Chicago style?

A: A frequent error is inconsistency in italicizing foreign words or failing to correctly render diacritical marks. Writers often struggle with deciding when a foreign term has become common enough in English to omit italics, or they may misapply capitalization or pronunciation cues.

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