

Common Areas of Difficulty in Writing Exercise #1: Grammar, Punctuation, Word Choice

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Common Difficulties with Writing

Exercise #1

- I. Use a **comma** before a conjunction joining two independent clauses—unless they are *closely* related and very short, in which case the comma is not required: *Redbook* Rule 1.4(a), p. 4 (exception not stated here).
 - Correct: “The plaintiff sued the defendant in negligence, and the defendant counterclaimed for breach of contract.” (**“Plaintiff” = subject one, and “defendant” = subject 2; “sued” = verb 1, and “counterclaimed” = verb 2.**)
 - Incorrect: “The plaintiff sued the defendant in negligence and the defendant counterclaimed for breach of contract.”

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2. Do not use a **comma** before a conjunction when the two items thereby joined are not full sentences, *i.e.*, are not independent clauses: *Redbook* Rule 1.4(b), p. 4.
- **Correct:** “The plaintiff sued the defendant in negligence and the intervener for breach of contract.” (“**The plaintiff**” = the sole subject; “**sued**” = the sole verb; the two items joined by the conjunction are alternate predicates—“the defendant ...” and “the intervener ...”)
 - **Correct:** “The plaintiff added a claim against the first defendant and nonsuited the second defendant.” (“**The plaintiff**” = the sole subject; “**sued ...**” = verb phrase 1; and “**nonsuited ...**” = verb phrase 2.)
 - **Incorrect:** “The plaintiff added a claim against the first defendant, and nonsuited the second defendant.”

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3. Use a **comma** after an introductory phrase or clause in a sentence: *Redbook*, Rule 1.5, p. 5.
 - Note exception: author has discretion to omit comma when introductory matter = 3 words or fewer.

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4. “Because”

- Do not use a comma before the word “because” unless another rule of punctuation requires that a comma be used in that position.
- “Because” is generally preferred to “since” or “as,” when the latter are used in the same sense as because (*Redbook*, p. 270).

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5. **Adverbs (including “only”)** should generally be located beside the word that they modify: *Redbook* Rule 10.41(a), p. 175.
- Correct: “The professor gave us only one book.”
(She gave us just one book, as opposed to giving us two or three books.)
 - Incorrect: “The professor only gave us one book.”
(The *intended* meaning was that the professor gave us a single book, but the *actual* meaning is that she simply gave us a book, as opposed to selling us a book or loaning us a book.)

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Exercise #1: Collective Nouns

6. A **collective noun** is an entity that is comprised of multiple individuals or individual parts. Examples: jury, company, corporation, majority, class, team, multi-judge court.

Collective nouns generally take singular verbs (and singular pronouns), with some wiggle room: See *Redbook* Rule 10.10(j), p. 150.

- Correct: “The jury is expected to return its verdict soon.”
- Incorrect: “The jury are expected to return their verdict soon.”
- *Note: The correct pronoun for “government” is “it,” not “they.”*

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7. Restrictive Clauses or Phrases (*Redbook* Rule 1.6(c), (d), pp. 6-7, and Rule 10.20(a), (c), pp. 156-57)

- A restrictive clause or phrase is one that is necessary to understand the word that the clause or phrase modifies.
- Do not use commas (or “em” dashes) to set off restrictive clauses or phrases.
- “That” (or “who” or “whom,” for people) is the relative pronoun that generally precedes restrictive clauses or phrases.
- Example:
 - There are three cars parked on a street: the first is blue, the second is red, and the third is yellow. I want to convey to the listener that my car is the yellow one. I would say, **“The car that is yellow is mine.”** “That is yellow” is necessary to understand the car about which I am speaking.

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8. **Nonrestrictive Clauses or Phrases** (*Redbook* Rule 1.6(a)-(b), p. 6, and Rule 10.20(b), (d), p. 157)

- A nonrestrictive clause or phrase is one that is not necessary to understand the word that the clause or phrase modifies.
- Use commas (or “em” dashes) to set off nonrestrictive clauses or phrases.
- “Which” (or “who” or “whom,” for people) is the relative pronoun that generally precedes nonrestrictive clauses or phrases.

Example:

- There is one car parked on a street. It happens to be yellow, but my possession of the car is the principle idea that I wish to convey to the listener, not the car’s color. I would say, **“The car, which is yellow, is mine.”**