

You can have the most compelling story in the world – but for many readers, they won't be able to focus on it if they are distracted by common grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors. Don't mar your chances simply because you confused "their" and "there"!

Below you will find many of the common errors we see when editing essays. Take a good look at your essays with these rules in mind!

Subject/verb agreement

Remember, whenever you refer to two things in a sentence, you need to ensure that your verb aligns with that plural noun.

- "My passion for the field and my experience *position* me well for my future career."
- "My passion for the field *positions* me well for my future career, as does my experience."

Often, the trick is being able to identify whether a subject is singular or plural!

- Two singular subjects connected by "or" or "nor" require a singular verb
 - "My colleague or my assistant is arriving shortly."
- Two singular subjects connected by "either/or" or "neither/nor" require a singular verb.
 - "Neither Boston nor New York appeals to me."

Hyphens

Phrases that have verb, noun, and adjective forms should appear as separate words when used as verbs; and as one word when used as nouns or adjectives.

- "I put my name on the committee sign-up sheet." (*adjective describing the type of sheet*)
- "I decided to sign up for the committee." (*verb*)

When writing a hyphenated phrase, you must hyphenate the whole thing:

- "12-year-old," *not* "12-year old"
- "Year-over-year returns," *not* "Year-over year returns"

Spell check

Make sure you spell check *everything* you write, *every time*. But don't rely on spell check exclusively – take one last read to ensure that you are not misusing homonyms:

- "They're" v. "There" v. "Their"
- "It's" v. "Its"
- "Compliment" v. "Complement"
- "Affect" v. "Effect"

Also, be sure to check on the spelling of other words that will not turn up in your spell check program, such as names of schools (both those you attended and those you are applying to) and names of professors you might want to study with.

Comma rules

- If you are connecting two thoughts with “but,” a comma is required.
- If you are connecting two thoughts with “and,” a comma is not required.
- If you are starting a sentence with a word or phrase such as “However” or “In addition,” you must use a comma after that phrase.
- It doesn’t matter whether you use a serial comma (“me, myself, and I” v. “me, myself and I”) – but make sure you are *consistent* in the style you choose!

Consistency (it’s not just for serial commas)

As with serial commas, make sure you are consistent in the way you use other forms of language, including:

- Writing out dates (don’t use “Nov.” in one place, then “September” in another)
- Writing out small numbers (don’t use “three” in one place, then “8” in another)
- How you use em-dashes (which look like this: —) and en-dashes (which look like this: –)

Even more importantly, make sure there are no contradictions between your application and your essay responses, your application and your résumé, or within your essay responses themselves; some items to double- and triple-check include:

- GPA
- Years of education/employment
- Spelling or phrasing of school/employer names

Lastly, always make sure you have someone else read through your essays before submitting them – you never know what minor detail you may have missed!