Grammar and Usage

Subject-Verb Agreement
- A verb must agree in number (singular or plural) with the subject of the sentence. Singular subjects take singular verbs; plural subjects take plural verbs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The <em>office</em> is closed.</td>
<td>Many <em>offices</em> are open past 5 p.m.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- The word before the verb is not always its subject. Look for *who* or *what* is doing the action.
  - Remember that two singular subjects joined by *and* are plural and need a plural verb.

  *My mother and father celebrate their anniversary in August.*

  - Sometimes an insertion separates the subject and verb.

    *The secretary, not the other employees, answers the phone.*

    *The man who sells homemade burritos has a large mustache.*

  - Sometimes a prepositional phrase separates the subject and the verb; read the sentence without the phrase to determine the correct verb.

    *One of the students was caught cheating on the exam.*

  - Words with *one* and *body* are singular.

    *Everyone except the new employees was given a raise.*

    - *-ing* phrases are usually singular.

      *Driving at night requires extra caution.*

Verb Tenses
- Use present tense verbs to state a fact, describe an ongoing action, or relate an incident in film or literature.

  *Dogs make excellent companions for the elderly.*

  *Hamlet stages a play to trap the man who murdered his father.*

- Use simple past tense to narrate an event that happened once.

  *Johnson hit a three-point shot to win the game.*
• Use *was* or *were* for a state of being in the past.

    *Kelli was sick yesterday.*

• For the past continuing up to the present, use *has* or *have* plus the past participle—usually an *-ed* ending.

    *Matt's grandfather has lived in the same house since college.*

• Use *had* plus the past participle, usually an *-ed* ending, when you are writing in the past tense and want to refer to an earlier event.

    *After a year had passed, Tiffany and Frank divorced.*

• To indicate the future tense, look at the following forms:

    *Nikki will graduate next spring.*
    *Nikki is going to graduate next spring.*
    *Nikki is graduating next spring.*

• *Be* verbs: *is, am, are, was, were*

    *Be* verbs are used as helping verbs with *-ing* verbs or with past participles—usually *-ed*.

    *Marie is traveling to Italy this summer.*
    *The World Trade Center was bombed on September 11, 2002.*

• *Have* verbs: *have, has, had*

    *Have verbs* are used as helping verbs with past participles—usually *-ed*.

    *We have waited long enough!*
    *Ross has always wanted a dog as a pet.*

• Other helping verbs:

    *She finally did finish her paper last night.*
    *As a child, I could write with either hand.*

**Irregular Verbs**
The following lists twenty-five irregular verbs. Most dictionaries list the forms of irregular verbs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Past Participle (after <em>have</em> or <em>be</em> verbs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>am, is, are</td>
<td>was, were</td>
<td>been</td>
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<td>bring</td>
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<td>cost, costs</td>
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<td>do, does</td>
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<td>fallen</td>
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<td>fly</td>
<td>flew</td>
<td>flown</td>
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</table>
Pronouns

- Make sure pronouns agree in number and gender: they are consistent. Avoid shifting from a person to they and from I to you.

- Consider the following sentences:

  A person should start a savings plan early if they want to retire comfortably.

- In this sentence, person is singular, meaning it requires a singular pronoun (he or she); the pronoun they is plural, which again can make the sentence awkward and can lead to errors. Instead, write:

  A person should start a savings plan early if he or she (not they) wants to retire comfortably.

- However, he or she can be awkward when used repeatedly. So try making the subject plural:

  People should start a savings plan early if they want to retire comfortably.

- The same principle applies to indefinite pronouns (pronouns that refer to nonspecific persons or things). Formal English treats pronouns such as anybody, everyone, somebody, and someone as singular; therefore, they require a singular pronoun:

  In my class, everyone works to the best of his or her (not their) ability.

- Similarly, this principle applies to other generic nouns:

  Every musician must practice regularly if he or she (not they) wants to excel.

- Again, the he or she or his or her constructions can be cumbersome. As another option, make the antecedents plural or rewrite the sentence so that no problem of agreement arises.