Common Grammatical Errors

It’s vs. Its – While apostrophes generally denote possession, in the case of it’s, the apostrophe indicates a contraction. Thus, it’s means “it is.” Its without the apostrophe is the possessive form of the pronoun. (You’re vs. your and they’re vs. their follow the same rule.)

IT’S — Contraction —— Means IT IS —— It’s nice to see you again.

ITS — Possessive —— Means belonging to —— The cat licked its paw.

Subject-Verb Agreement – A singular verb must always be used with a singular subject. Similarly, a plural verb must be used with a plural subject.

Incorrect – Peter, Paul, and Mary splits the dinner bill.

Correct – Peter, Paul, and Mary split the dinner bill.

Correct – Carrie plays with the cat in the yard.

This rule often becomes confusing when words appear between the subject and verb. However, words that appear between the subject and verb DO NOT affect agreement. If it helps, mentally cross out the intervening words in order to focus on the subject and verb.

Incorrect – The old boots that were lying at the top of the stairs smells terrible.

Correct – The old boots that were lying at the top of the stairs smell terrible.
**Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement** – The antecedent (the word that a pronoun refers to) must agree in number with the pronoun.

This type of error sometimes occurs when the antecedent seems to be plural but actually denotes a group or unit—one group or unit as a whole.

- **Singular Antecedent (1 Group)**
  - **Plural Pronoun**
  - **Incorrect** – The *team* scored *their* final goal in overtime.
  - **Correct** – The *team* scored *its* final goal in overtime.

This type of error can also occur when the antecedent is an indefinite pronoun (i.e., refers to nonspecific persons or things) and seems to have a plural meaning but actually is singular.

- **Singular Antecedent (Each individual person)**
  - **Plural Pronoun**
  - **Incorrect** – In this class, *everyone* performs at *their* fitness level.
  - **Correct** – In this class, *everyone* performs at *her or his* fitness level.

**Run-on Sentences** – Run-on sentences fuse two independent clauses (a word group that can stand alone as a sentence) incorrectly.

- **Incorrect** – I went to the store I bought bread. [A conjunction is missing.]

When two independent clauses appear in one sentence, they must be joined in one of these ways:

- Use a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet)
  - **Correct** – I went to the store, *and* I bought bread.

- Use a semicolon. A semicolon joins two independent clauses.
  - **Correct** – I went to the store; I bought bread.

**Sentence Fragments** – A sentence fragment is only part of a sentence. It can be a dependent clause (has a subject and verb but begins with a subordinating conjunction or a relative pronoun) or a phrase that lacks either a subject or a verb.

- **Incorrect** – Because the torrential downpour ruined the fields. [This is a dependent clause.]
- **Correct** – Because the torrential downpour ruined the fields, the games were canceled.
Incorrect – That failed to meet the teacher’s expectations. [This is a dependent clause.]
Correct – The boy had to redo the assignment that failed to meet the teacher’s expectations.

Incorrect – Waited all day long until the line finally dwindled. [A subject is missing.]
Correct – She waited all day long until the line finally dwindled.

Incorrect – The brown sweater that was in my closet last night. [A verb is missing.]
Correct – The brown sweater that was in my closet last night is now missing.