COMMON SENTENCE-LEVEL WRITING ISSUES

Write in Complete Sentences: Look for comma splices, fragments, and run-on sentences. A comma splice is a specific type of run-on sentence in which a writer joins two independent clauses with a comma and leaves out a coordinating conjunction (e.g. I hit the ball, I ran to first base. Correct: I hit the ball, and I ran to first base.) A sentence fragment is part of a sentence that is set off as if it were a whole sentence. To test a sentence for completeness, look for the sentence’s subject and verb, and then make sure the clause is not subordinate. Subordinate clauses serve as parts of sentences—nouns or modifiers—not as whole sentences (e.g. When the government devised the Internet. Correct: When the government devised the Internet, no expansive computer network existed.) Run-on sentences fuse two independent clauses together, and, depending on your intended meaning, can be corrected by: making the clauses into two, separate sentences; inserting a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction (such as and or but); inserting a semi-colon between the clauses; or subordinating one clause to the other.

Use Parallel Structure: Whenever you use a series, either in a sentence or in a list, try to give the parts of the series in parallel grammatical structure. That is, call attention to the similarities of the items in the series or list by using the same grammatical structure to introduce or name each one (e.g. #1: The meeting will deal with manufacturing, distributing, and how we market our products. Correct: The meeting will deal with manufacturing, distributing, and marketing. e.g. #2: This semester I plan to finish my thesis, applying for jobs, and taught creative writing. Correct: This semester I plan to finish my thesis, apply for jobs, and teach creative writing.)

Pronoun Reference: Pronouns (I, you, he, she, it, we, you, they, them, their, me, mine, my, our, ours, who, whom, some, any, few, etc.) should clearly refer to the nouns they stand for. For example, “Managers like engineers because they are pragmatic and logical” is ambiguous because it does not tell clearly whether the managers or the engineers are “pragmatic and logical.” You might revise the sentence this way: “Managers like the logical, pragmatic approach that engineers take to problems.” In this sentence, “John called the Quality Assurance manager, but he was busy and didn’t follow through,” who was busy, John or the manager? Try it this way: “After he called the Quality Assurance manager, John got busy and didn’t follow through.”

Misplaced Modifiers: Always place modifiers so that they point clearly to the word or phrase they modify. If you get them out of place, they will refer to the wrong part of your sentence. To illustrate this, let’s look at the word only, which often causes problems. In the sentence “He only arrived this morning,” you would be saying the he arrived this morning and did nothing else. What you would mean, though, is that “He arrived only this morning.” In the revised sentence, only modifies when he arrived, rather than his arrival itself. Similarly, only is misplaced in this sentence: “He only said that to make you feel good.” Instead, you should write, “He said that only to make you feel good.”

Dangling Modifiers: Dangling modifiers point to something that is not part of the sentence. That is, in the process of writing the sentence, a writer leaves out the word or
phrase that the modifier points to. For example, “Knowing that you are a careful worker, the finished product will be excellent,” says that the finished product knows you are a careful worker. Revise the sentence to show who knows, like this: “Knowing that you are a careful worker, we are sure the finished product will be excellent.”

While misplaced and dangling modifiers will sometimes obscure your meaning, more often they will suggest that you are a careless writer who does not know or care enough to construct sentences carefully. Either way, as writers, we want to write as clearly as possible, and we don’t want to seem as if we are careless, especially when we are trying to solicit work from an individual or business.