

REVIEW SHEETS FOR COMPASS WRITING SECTION

Prepared by Karen Cahill, SCC English/Education instructor

Section 1--Three Kinds of Verbs

Every sentence contains a **verb**. There are three kinds of verbs—action verbs, linking verbs, and verb phrases. **Action verbs** describe what is happening, what has already happened, or what will happen. For example, **The students take the COMPASS test when they are ready.** In this sentence, **take** is the verb. It describes an action, so it is an **action verb**.

The second kind of verb is a **linking verb**. It links together the subject of the sentence (the person, place, or thing that the sentence is about) with either a description or a renaming of the subject. Commonly used linking verbs are forms of the verb **be** (am, is, are, was, were, has been, have been, had been...); words that are like “be” in meaning, such as seem, appear, become, remain, prove, grow, and turn; and words having to do with the five senses, such as look, sound, feel, smell, and taste. For example, **The Success Center is a busy place.** In this sentence, **is** is a linking verb, linking together the subject, Success Center, with a description of the subject—“busy place.” In the sentence **My sister was my friend**, the linking verb **was** links together the subject, sister, with a renaming of the subject (sister=friend).

The third kind of verb is a **verb phrase**. It consists of a main verb and one or more helping verbs. Common helping verbs are forms of the verb “be” (listed in the preceding paragraph), shall, will, have (has, had), do (does, did), can, could, should, would, may, must, might, ought (to). Most of the time, a helping verb and main verb will appear together in a sentence, but not always. For example, in the sentence **The boys are calling their parents**, the verb phrase is **are calling**. However, sometimes the helping verb is separated from the main verb, or parts of the helping verb may be separated from each other. For example, **Am I invited to the party?** In this sentence, the verb phrase is **am invited**. In the sentence **Have they ever been tested?**, the verb phrase is **have been tested**.

Section 2--Verb Tenses

There are six **verb tenses**. Verb tenses reflect time. Three are **simple**, and three are **perfect**. The **simple tenses** are present, past, and future. The **perfect tenses** are present perfect, past perfect, and future perfect. Let’s consider the “regular” (typical) verb **talk**. The simple present tense form is **talk**. The simple past tense form is **talked**. The simple future tense form is **will talk** or **shall talk**.

Now let’s consider the “perfect” tense forms of the verb **talk**. The present perfect tense form is **has talked** or **have talked**. The past perfect tense form is **had talked**. The future perfect tense form is **will have talked** or **shall have talked**.

Some verbs are “irregular” (not typical) in the way they change to reflect time. For example, the verb **drive** is irregular. The simple present tense form is **drive**. The simple past tense form is **drove**. The simple future tense form is **will drive** or **shall drive**. The present perfect tense form is **has driven** or **have driven**. The past perfect tense form is **had driven**. The future perfect tense form is **will have driven** or **shall have driven**.

Section 3--Verb Tense Consistency

Most of you understand verb tenses, but some of you have trouble keeping verb tenses consistent as you write. For example, you may begin a paragraph using simple present tense, but throughout the paragraph, shift back and forth between simple present tense and simple past tense, or between simple future tense and future perfect tense. **Careful proofreading and reading your writing out loud will solve this problem.** Consider this paragraph, and see if you can spot the improper shifts in verb tense.

My family will always remember how we acquired our favorite pet. Eighteen years ago, our beloved cat Happy dies of feline leukemia, and our younger son Evan is devastated. Within a couple of weeks, Evan, then ten, decided it was time to replace our dearly departed pet. After several days of scouring the want ads for a kitten, he gives up and called the Animal Protection Agency. A nice woman had answered and after talking to Evan for several minutes, said, "Have I got a cat for you." The one she has in mind was the one who lived in her dog grooming shop, whose mother had wandered in as a stray and had given birth in the back room. The woman had found homes for the cat's siblings but keeps him because of his unique personality. She had named him "Harley" because his markings reminded her of a Harley Davidson cycle rider's jacket. She explains to Evan that she was moving and needed to find a home for Harley and was convinced that Evan and his family will treat Harley well. The next day, my husband goes to the dog grooming shop to pick up our new pet. It makes my husband's day when Harley jumps from the shop owner's arms into his and when he rode on my husband's shoulder all the way home.

Now, read the paragraph the way it should have been written—without unnecessary shifting of verb tenses.

My family will always remember how we acquired our favorite pet. Eighteen years ago, our beloved can Happy died of feline leukemia, and our younger son Evan was devastated. Within a couple of weeks, Evan, then ten, decided it was time to replace our dearly departed pet. After several days of scouring the want ads for a kitten, he gave up and called the Animal Protection Agency. A nice woman answered and after talking to Evan for several minutes, said, "Have I got a cat for you." The one she had in mind was the one who lived in her dog grooming shop, whose mother had wandered in as a stray and had given birth in the back room. The woman had found homes for the cat's siblings but had kept him because of his unique personality. She had named him "Harley" because his markings reminded her of a Harley Davidson cycle rider's jacket. She explained to Evan that she was moving and needed to find a home for Harley and was convinced that Evan and his family would treat Harley well. The next day, my husband went to the dog grooming shop to pick up our new pet. It made my husband's day when Harley jumped from the shop owner's arms into his and when he rode on my husband's shoulder all the way home.

For more practice with verbs, go to <http://www.towson.edu/ows/verbs.htm>.

Section 4--Sentences

In order to call itself a sentence, a group of words must contain a **subject** and a **verb**, and it must convey a **complete thought**. Please reread the Section 1 to refresh your memory of verbs. (Yes, really do it.) Moving on, the subject is the person, place, or thing that the sentence is about. In the sentence **My Doberman ate my math assignment**, it's easy to find the verb—ate. That's right; it's an action verb. To find the subject, first find the verb, and then ask the question "Who or what _____ (fill in the verb)," and the answer to your question will be the subject. In the preceding example, you would ask, "Who or what ate?" Of course, your answer, Doberman, would be the subject.

Besides having a subject and a verb, a sentence must convey a complete thought. If your teacher walked into the classroom and said, "Because you students all did well on the quiz," you'd stop talking and expect her to finish her statement. If she did not finish it, you would begin to wonder if her mind was somewhere other than her classroom. You would probably ask her to finish her statement because you would be curious about the conclusion of it. If she said, "I'm sorry; let me start over. Because you students all did well on the quiz, you will not have a test next Wednesday," your brain would be satisfied because it is used to hearing complete sentences—not to mention that you would have one less test to study for next week.

Other sentence-structure errors that students sometimes make are **run-on sentences** and **comma splices**. A run-on sentence incorrectly combines two independent clauses (groups of words that could stand alone as sentences) without punctuation or conjunctions (connecting words, such as "and" and "but"). For example, the sentence **I had a good day today I got an A on my math test** is a "run-on" because it contains two independent clauses joined without punctuation or conjunctions. A **comma splice** is similar to a "run-on" because it contains two independent clauses. It is different from a "run-on" because the two clauses are incorrectly joined by a comma. The correct way to join two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) is to place a comma before the conjunction. The preceding sentence should read **I had a good day today, for I got an A on my math test**.

To avoid writing incomplete sentences, run-on sentences, and comma splices, proofread carefully and read your writing out loud. Reading your writing out loud will also help you correct any **incoherent sentences**, or sentences that don't make sense. An example of an incoherent sentence is **Why he skips work is me a mystery**. You should rewrite it: **Why he skips work is a mystery to me**.

For more practice with sentences, go to <http://www.towson.edu/ows/sentelmt.htm>.

Section 5--Agreement

There are two kinds of “agreement” in a sentence. The subject must agree with the verb, and the pronoun must agree with its antecedent. If the subject is singular (one), the verb must be singular; if the subject is plural (more than one), the verb must be plural. In the sentence **The first semester is usually the most difficult**, you can figure out that the verb is **is** and that the subject is **semester**. (“First” is an adjective, or descriptive word, modifying “semester.”) They “agree” because they both are singular. In the sentence **My cat are my best friend**, you could easily spot an agreement problem because “are,” the verb, is plural, and “cat,” the subject, is singular.

The second kind of agreement in a sentence is between the pronoun and its antecedent. First, what is a pronoun? It is a word that replaces a noun, or word that names a person, place, or thing. For example, if you were writing a paragraph about Joe, you wouldn’t want to keep repeating the word “Joe,” so you would refer to Joe with the pronouns “he” and “him.” Some pronouns refer to specific persons or things, such as the following: I, me, myself, she, her, herself, he, him, himself, they, them, themselves, we, us, ourselves, you, yourself, yourselves, who, whom, it, itself, and that. Some pronouns refer to nouns in a general way, such as the following: each, everyone, nobody, and somebody. These are called “indefinite” pronouns and are considered singular when they act as subjects. For example, in the sentence **Each of the students (has, have) a book**, which verb would you choose? You know that the verb is either “has” or “have,” so as you remember, to find the subject, you would ask “Who or what has or have?” Your answer would be the subject, “each.” Since “each” is considered singular, the verb would be **has** instead of **have**.

Other pronouns refer to particular things. These “demonstrative” pronouns include the following: this, that, these, and those. Finally, some pronouns introduce questions; two examples are “which” and “what.” For example, in the sentence **Which is the right answer?**, “which” introduces the question “is the right answer?”

Now that you know what a pronoun is, what is an “antecedent”? It is the word to which the pronoun refers. For example, in the sentence **The class worked until they fell asleep**, “they” would be the pronoun, referring to the word “class.” Therefore, “class” is the antecedent of the pronoun “they.”

Pronouns and their antecedents must agree in three ways. First, they must agree in **number**. A singular antecedent requires a singular pronoun; a plural antecedent requires a plural pronoun. In the sentence **The children want his dinner now**, you notice an “agreement” problem. The pronoun is singular, and the antecedent is plural.

Second, a pronoun and its antecedent must agree in “person,” or “point of view.” First-person narration means that the writer is referring to him- or herself alone or in a group. The writer would use pronouns like “I,” “me,” “we,” and “us.” Second-person narration means that the writer is addressing an audience of one or more people. The pronouns “you” and “your” are used. Third-person narration means that the writer is referring to other people or things, using such pronouns as the following: he, him, she, her, it, they, and them. In the sentence **The students never know what we will learn from reading their textbook**, you notice an agreement problem between the pronoun “we,” which is “first-person narration” and its antecedent “students,” which is “third-person narration.” To correct the error, you could rewrite the sentence to read **The students never know what they will learn from reading their textbook**.

Finally, a pronoun must agree with its antecedent in **gender** if the gender of the antecedent is specific. Examples of masculine pronouns are he and him; examples of feminine pronouns are she and her. Some pronouns are neuter: I, we, me, us, it, they, them, who, whom, that, and which. The pronouns “who” and “whom” refer to people, “that” refers to people or things, and “which” refers to things. In the sentence **Everyone should sign up for his classes**, the pronoun “his” would not agree with the subject “everyone,” which would include both males and

females. You would solve this problem by rewriting the sentence to read **Everyone should sign up for his or her classes**. To avoid the awkward “him or her, he or she” construction, you may choose to switch from a singular to a plural subject and to rewrite the sentence as follows: **All students should sign up for their classes**.

For more practice with “agreement,” go to <http://www.towson.edu/ows/sub-verb.htm> and http://wwwnew.towson.edu/ows/pro_antagree.htm.

Section 6--Modifiers

A modifier (word, phrase, or clause that describes) should be as close as possible to the word it describes and should, of course, describe some word in the sentence. Otherwise, you may end up with either a **misplaced or a dangling modifier**. In both of these cases, the sentence sounds awkward as you read it. In the following sentence, you will notice a “misplaced” modifier: **Wandering in the hallway, the teacher gave TJ a detention**. The writer did not mean that the teacher was wandering in the hallway, but that TJ was. To correct this misconception, the writer needs to change the order of the words to read **The teacher gave TJ a detention for wandering in the hallways** or **Wandering in the hallways, TJ received a detention**. In the following sentence, you will notice a “dangling” modifier, called such because it does not refer to anything in the sentence: **After taking the COMPASS, a computer tabulated the results**. The writer did not mean that the computer took the COMPASS, but that after one or more students took the COMPASS, the computer tabulated the results.

The parts of speech that function as modifiers are **adjectives and adverbs**. It is important to understand the difference between them so that you use the right form of a word that describes another word. **Adjectives** modify nouns and pronouns, and they explain what kind, which one, or how many. **Adverbs** modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs, and they tell how, in what manner, when, where, or to what extent. In the sentence **The feisty cat wanted to go outside in spite of the two ravenous coyotes circling the neighborhood**, the adjectives “feisty” and “ravenous” describe the nouns “cat” and “coyote” by telling “what kind.” The adjective “two” describes the noun “coyotes” and tells “how many.” In the sentence **The very old man drove extremely slowly today as he looked for his new friend’s house**, the adverb “very” modifies the adjective “old” by describing “to what extent” the man is old. The adverb “extremely” modifies the adverb “slowly” by telling “to what extent” the man was driving slowly. The adverb “slowly” modifies the verb “drove” by describing “how” he drove. Finally, the adverb “today” modifies the verb “drove” by telling “when” he drove.

Many adjectives can be changed into adverbs by adding an **ly** ending. For example, **slow** becomes **slowly**, **easy** becomes **easily**, **quiet** becomes **quietly**. To use the right form, figure out whether the word you are describing is a noun or pronoun (use the adjective form) or a verb, adjective, or adverb (use the adverb form). Doing this will help you avoid writing sentences like this one: **The gleefully children walked careful on the extreme hot day as they explored the mountainly trail**. Let’s try this again: **The gleeful children walked carefully on the extremely hot day as they explored the mountain trail**.

For more practice with modifiers, go to <http://www.towson.edu/ows/adjectives.htm> and <http://www.towson.edu/ows/adverbs.htm>.

Section 7--Commas

No need to become frustrated by commas. If you remember some simple rules, you can get the job done. Ready?

RULE #1: Use commas to separate items in a series of three or more. These items may be words, phrases, or clauses. For example, in the sentence **I bought milk, bread, and eggs**, you notice that commas separate a series of **words**: milk, bread, and eggs. In the sentence **We went over the river, across the field, and behind the cabin**, you notice that commas separate a series of **phrases (groups of words without subjects and verbs)**. In the sentence **We cooked, we cleaned, and we did the laundry**, you notice that commas separate a series of **clauses (groups of words with subjects and verbs)**.

RULE #2: Use commas to separate independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction. An easy way to remember the coordinating conjunctions is to remember the acronym “FANBOYS.” These conjunctions are the following: **for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so**. An independent clause is a group of words that could function as a sentence—it contains a subject, a verb, and it conveys a complete thought. A “simple” sentence consists of one independent clause. If a sentence contains more than one independent clause, it is called a “compound sentence.” This is where the “FANBOYS” conjunctions come in: They—along with one or more commas-- are used to connect two or more independent clauses to form a compound sentence. The following sentence is a “compound” one: **Dave called me, and he wanted me to attend the show.**

RULE #3: Use a comma to separate an introductory word, phrase, or clause from the rest of the sentence. Notice the commas in the following sentences: (1) However, the show must go on. (2) Before I go, I want to tell you the whole story. (3) Whenever we eat, the phone rings.

RULE #4: Use a comma to separate two or more adjectives that modify the same noun or pronoun but not each other. In the sentence **We saw the humorous, creative film about the nerd who became class president**, a comma separates “humorous” and “creative” because they both modify the noun “film.” By contrast, in the sentence **A local volunteer group prepared the meal**, there is no comma between the adjectives “local” and “volunteer” because “local” modifies not only the noun “group” but also the adjective “volunteer.” Run these two tests to see if you need a comma between two adjectives appearing together: Insert the word “and” between them, and then reverse them. If it sounds right, you need a comma; if it does not sound right, omit the comma. In the preceding examples, it would sound right to say “a humorous and creative” film,” but not “a volunteer and local group.” It would sound right to say “a creative, humorous film” but not “a volunteer, local group.”

RULE #5: Use a comma to set off parenthetical words, phrases, and clauses. You probably notice the word “parentheses” in the word “parenthetical.” A parenthetical word, phrase, or clause provides information that is not **essential** to the meaning of the sentence but rather **additional** because it adds detail or explanation. Notice how commas set off the parenthetical information in the following sentences: (1) My best friend, Joe, is my brother. (2) My favorite time of the day, between 6:00 and 8:00 in the morning, is when I like to read. (3) My friend Mary, who teaches home economics at the high school, likes to swim.

RULE #6: Use commas to set off words, phrases, or clauses that interrupt the flow of a sentence. Notice this use of commas in the following examples: (1) We want, therefore, to use your phone. (2) He knew, of course, that he was to blame. (3) The truth, that he stole the money, was never discovered.

RULE #7: Use a comma after “yes” and “no” when answering a question: Yes, I’d like to go. No, I’m sure you don’t understand.

RULE #8: Use a comma after nouns of direct address: Bill, I want those papers now.

RULE #9: Use a comma after interjections—“feeling” words not connected grammatically to the sentence--such as oh, ah, and wow. Notice the commas after interjections in the following sentences: (1) Oh, those pies are delicious! (2) Ah, now I understand! (3) Wow, I really like playing this game!

RULE #10: Use a comma after a “tag question” at the end of a sentence. For example, **She isn’t going to be there, is she?**

RULE#11: Use a comma to contrast: **He is from Keokuk, not Burlington.**

RULE #12: Use commas between and after the elements of dates and addresses. Notice the commas in the following sentence: She was born on October 31, 1966, in Burlington, Iowa, after a Halloween party. The exceptions to this rule apply when using reversed European style (3 June 2006) and when a zip code follows a state (Iowa 52601). In these cases, omit the comma. Also, use a comma before abbreviations such as **Inc.** and **Ltd.** in an address but not before **Co.** (**Martins, Inc., but Martin Brothers Co.**).

RULE #13: Use a comma to introduce a direct quotation, such as in the following sentence: **Dan said, “I like horror flicks.”** When the direct quotation comes first, use a comma after the quotation unless it is a question or quotation: “I want to go home,” said the boy. “What time is the party?” the girl asked.

RULE #14: Use a comma after the salutation and closing of a friendly letter. **Dear John** is an example of a salutation, and **Yours truly** is an example of a closing.

RULE #15: Use commas to separate a title from a name when the title follows the name. For example: **George Henry, J.D., is a senior partner in his law firm.**

RULE #16: Use commas in numbers over 3 digits. Start at the right, and place a comma after every third digit: **4,500,000.** Use commas to separate elements in statistics: **five feet, nine inches; seven pounds, one ounce; five hours, fifty minutes.**

RULE #17: Use a comma to avoid misreading. **After reading the man went to sleep** would be more understandable if it read, **After reading, the man went to sleep.**

For more practice with commas, go to <http://www.towson.edu/ows/comma.htm>.

Section 8--Apostrophes

Apostrophes are used for five different reasons.

Reason #1: They are used in contractions to indicate omitted letters and words. For example, in the sentence **We'll all go to the party**, the apostrophe in "we'll" takes the place of the omitted letters "w" and "i." Without the contraction, the sentence would read **We will all go to the party**. In the sentence **It was nine o'clock**, the apostrophe in "o'clock" takes the place of the letter "f" and the word "the." Without the contraction, the sentence would read **It was nine of the clock**.

Reason #2: Apostrophes are used to show ownership. Add an apostrophe followed by an s if the word is a noun or pronoun that does not already end in s. For example, **I envy Don's artistic ability**. **The girl's pottery is beautiful**. **The children's artwork was displayed**. Add only an apostrophe if the word already ends in s. For example, **The class' work was hung on the walls**. **Mr. Jones' car was stolen**.

Reason #3: Use an apostrophe in expressions of time: **I need a day's rest**.

Reason #4: Use an apostrophe to indicate the plural of letters, words, and numbers: **The word has too many a's**. **Your essay has a lot of I's**. **My 7's look funny**.

Reason #5: Use an apostrophe to show omitted numbers: **My husband graduated from law school in '77**.

For more practice with apostrophes, go to <http://www.towson.edu/ows/punct2.htm>.

When you feel you are ready to take the COMPASS test, please set up your test time by contacting one of SCC's SuCCess Centers.

To take the COMPASS test in:

West Burlington, call: 319-208-5157

Fort Madison, call: 319-376-2286

Keokuk, call: 319-313-1923

Mt. Pleasant, call: 319-385-8012