Grammar and Style Essentials Cheatsheet

A concise cheat sheet covering fundamental grammar rules, stylistic guidelines, and common writing errors to enhance clarity and precision in written communication.

Basic Grammar Rules

Subject-Verb Agreement

Singular subjects take singular verbs.	`The cat sleeps.`
Plural subjects take plural verbs.	`The cats sleep.`
Subjects joined by `and` usually take a plural verb.	`John and Mary are going.`
Subjects joined by `or` or `nor` take a verb that agrees with the subject closest to the verb.	`Neither the students nor the teacher is here.`
Collective nouns (e.g., team, family) can be singular or plural depending on whether they act as a unit or as individuals.	`The team is playing well.` (unit) `The team are arguing.` (individuals)

Pronoun Agreement

Pronouns must agree in number and gender with their antecedents (the nouns they refer to).	`The student finished his homework.`
Use plural pronouns with plural antecedents.	`The students finished their homework.`
Avoid ambiguous pronoun references. Ensure each pronoun clearly refers to a specific noun.	**Incorrect:** `John told Bill that he was wrong.` (Who was wrong?) **Correct:** `John told Bill, 'You are wrong.'`
Use gender-neutral pronouns (they/them/their) when the gender of the antecedent is unknown or non-binary.	`Each participant should bring their own lunch.`

Correct Tense Usage

Present Simple: Habitual actions, facts.	`I eat breakfast every morning.`
Past Simple: Completed actions in the past.	`I ate breakfast this morning.`
Future Simple: Actions that will happen in the future.	`I will eat breakfast tomorrow.`
Use consistent tense throughout a sentence and paragraph unless there is a clear reason to change.	**Incorrect:** `I went to the store, and I will buy milk.` **Correct:** `I went to the store, and I bought milk.`

Punctuation Essentials

Commas

Use commas to separate items in a list.
`I need apples, bananas, and oranges.`

Use commas before coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet) that join independent clauses.
`I wanted to go to the park, but it started raining.`

Use commas after introductory phrases or clauses.
`After the game, we went out for pizza.`

Use commas to set off nonessential (nonrestrictive) phrases and clauses.
`My brother, who is a doctor, is visiting.`

Use commas to separate coordinate adjectives (adjectives that independently modify the same noun).
`It was a cold, dark night.`

Semicolons

Use semicolons to join two closely related independent clauses.
`The sun was shining; it was a beautiful day.`

Use semicolons to separate items in a list when the items themselves contain commas.
`I visited Paris, France; Rome, Italy; and London, England.`

Apostrophes

Use apostrophes to indicate possession.	`John's car`, `the cat's tail`
Use apostrophes to indicate contractions (omitted letters).	`can't` (cannot), `it's` (it is)
Do not use apostrophes for possessive pronouns (his, hers, its, ours, yours, theirs).	**Incorrect:** `It's tail is long.` **Correct:** `Its tail is long.`

Style Guidelines

Clarity and Conciseness

Avoid jargon and overly complex language. Use plain language whenever possible.

Eliminate unnecessary words and phrases. Be direct and to the point.

Use active voice instead of passive voice whenever appropriate. Active voice is usually more direct and easier to understand.
Passive: `The ball was thrown by the boy.`
Active: `The boy threw the ball.`

Write short, clear sentences. Break up long sentences into smaller, more manageable units.

Word Choice

Choose words that are precise and accurate. Avoid vague or ambiguous language.	**Vague:** `The project was successful.` **Precise:** `The project increased sales by 20%.`
Be mindful of connotation (the emotional associations of a word) as well as denotation (the literal meaning).	Consider the difference between 'thrifty' and 'stingy'.
Use strong verbs and nouns. Avoid using weak verbs like 'to be' and vague nouns like 'thing'.	**Weak:** `The presentation was interesting.` **Strong:** `The presentation captivated the audience.`

Sentence Structure

Vary your sentence structure to make your writing more engaging. Mix short and long sentences.

Use parallel structure when listing items or ideas. Ensure that items in a list have the same grammatical form.
Not Parallel: `I like to swim, hiking, and to bike.`
Parallel: `I like to swim, hike, and bike.`

Place modifiers close to the words they modify to avoid ambiguity.
Ambiguous: `He saw a dog running down the street with a limp.` (Did the street have a limp?)
Clear: `He saw a dog with a limp running down the street.`

Common Writing Errors

Misplaced Modifiers

A misplaced modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that is incorrectly separated from the word it modifies.

Incorrect: `Covered in chocolate, I ate the strawberries.` (Were you covered in chocolate?)

Correct: `I ate the strawberries covered in chocolate.`

Dangling Modifiers

A dangling modifier does not clearly modify any word in the sentence. Often, the subject is missing.

Incorrect: `Walking down the street, the buildings looked beautiful.` (Who was walking?)

Correct: `Walking down the street, I thought the buildings looked beautiful.`

Faulty Parallelism

Ensure items in a list or series have the same grammatical structure.

Incorrect: `She likes reading, to hike, and swimming.`

Correct: `She likes reading, hiking, and swimming.`

Comma Splices

A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses are joined by only a comma. Use a semicolon, coordinating conjunction, or separate the clauses into two sentences.

Incorrect: `The sun was shining, it was a beautiful day.`

Correct: `The sun was shining; it was a beautiful day.`

Correct: `The sun was shining, and it was a beautiful day.`

Correct: `The sun was shining. It was a beautiful day.`

Run-on Sentences

A run-on sentence combines two or more independent clauses without proper punctuation or conjunctions. Break it into separate sentences, or use appropriate punctuation.

Incorrect: `I went to the store I bought milk.`

Correct: `I went to the store. I bought milk.`

Correct: `I went to the store, and I bought milk.`