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Grammar for Historians and Others

Grammar and mechanics are important for a variety of reasons—all of them good. All your posts and papers should be grammatically correct in all their particulars. Correctness includes spelling, punctuation, diction, and mechanics. Here are some common grammatical problems that arise in history papers, listed with the correction mark for each, and the solution to the problem. Although the correction abbreviations do not appear in blog evaluations, the grammar list is pertinent to blogs.

Shift in verb tenses (ST): “Bernal Diaz presented a positive view of the Spanish because he wants to protect himself from recrimination.” (Put “wants” in the same tense (past): “wanted.”)

Shift in person (SP): “You really have to appreciate what Christopher Columbus did. I think that he....” (Use the third person singular or plural in writing historical prose: “Readers should appreciate Christopher Columbus’s accomplishments. He....”)

Passive voice (PV): “The Aztecs were destroyed in droves, and finally defeated.” (Identify the proper subject of this sentence and re-work, as in “The Spanish destroyed the Aztecs and droves, and finally defeated them.”)

Run-on sentence (R/O): “Coffee contains caffeine furthermore, chocolate, tea, and cola also contain significant amounts of caffeine.” (Add a semi-colon after “caffeine” to properly conjoin two independent clauses.)

Comma splice (SPLICE): “Many industrialists thought workers lazy, as a result they paid their employees poorly.” (Replace comma after “lazy” with a semi-colon to properly conjoin two independent clauses.)

Sentence fragment (FRAG.): “The little town of Dayton, Tennessee, in the tumultuous 1920s, caught in the international limelight.” (The sentence needs a verb for its subject, Dayton.)

Faulty pronoun reference (REF): “The Spaniard hated the Aztec because of their religious beliefs.” (The referent for “their” (“Aztec”) is singular; change “their” to “his or her” or change “Aztec” to “Aztecs.”)

Subject-verb agreement (S/V): “The army required each one of the soldiers to carry their own entrenching tool.” (“Their” is plural, yet refers to the singular “one,” not “soldiers.” “The army required each soldier to carry his own entrenching tool.”)

Faulty predication (PRED): “The belief in Manifest Destiny cannot conceive of Indians having rights.” (“Conceiving” is a verb that “belief” is incapable of carrying out. Identify proper subject for the verb: “People who believe in Manifest Destiny cannot conceive. . . .”)

Misplaced modifier (DP) “The slaves burned the farmhouse, furious at their masters.” (The participial phrase “furious at their masters” cannot modify “farmhouse” (a farmhouse cannot be furious); it must be placed immediately after “slaves.”)

Dangling modifier (MOD): “Arriving by boat in the New World, the weather was brutal.” (The weather cannot arrive by boat in the New World; identify the proper subject for the first clause, as in “Arriving by boat in the New World, the Puritans found the weather brutal.”)

Faulty parallel structure (| |ISM): “Ways of preventing blacks from voting included the Grandfather Clause and holding all-white primaries.” (A noun, “Grandfather Clause,” is listed in series with a verb, “holding.”) Re-work so both are the same, as in “... included the Grandfather Clause and the all-white primary.”)

Colloquial (COLL): “Some critics try to straddle the fence between standard and revisionist interpretations of history.” (Substitute non-colloquial phrase for “straddle the fence,” as in “Some critics endorse elements of both standard and revisions interpretations of history.”)

Word choice (WW): “One slave tells of how he was able to get a job after the war and earned enough money to travel to North Carolina to find his long separated mother.” (His mother had probably remained in once piece; substitute “lost” for “separated.”)

Spelling (“sp”) “The army traveled on it’s belly.” (The word it’s is misspelled and must be corrected.)

Quotations (QUOT): The Virginia patriots were forceful in their protest. “Give me liberty or give me death.” (The Virginia patriots were forceful in their protest. When Patrick Henry said, “Give me liberty or give me death,” his statement bordered on treason; quotation needs to be introduced, punctuated, connected to the material that it illustrates, or formatted correctly.)

Other comments you may see:

source?: What is your source for saying this? Add a citation telling your readers where this came from.

evidence?: What is the evidence that supports this argument? You need to incorporate primary or secondary source evidence.

thesis?: What is the thesis for the essay. You need to revise your thesis or frame a different proposition or argument.

trans?: Where is the transitional sentence? You need to re-write or include a transitional sentence to move between paragraphs.

awkward (AWK): A single or combination of factors—word choice, sentence structure, mechanical—that contribute to awkward phrasing.

[a wavy underline]: What is going on here? The prose makes no sense, and the reader cannot understand what you wish to communicate. You need to wholly revise the statement or paragraph.

^: An element is missing and needs to be added

/: Delete or make lowercase

[a longish line with a small cursive e at the top]: Delete

p#s: page numbers are missing