ERRORS TO AVOID IN ACADEMIC WRITING

Learning to write well is learning how to avoid making errors. Here are some common mistakes to avoid in writing

1) Sentence Fragment

A sentence fragment is a piece of a sentence which has been punctuated as if it were a complete sentence. Usually it is a <u>phrase</u> or subordinate <u>clause</u> which has been improperly separated from a main clause.

Example: *Some of the students working in the laboratory last semester.*

Corrected sentence: *Some of the students were working in the laboratory last semester.*

2) Wordiness

Wordiness is the use of more words than necessary to effectively convey meaning in speech or writing.

Example: Despite the fact that she was feeling ill, she came to the conclusion that she would go to work.

Corrected sentence: Despite feeling ill, she decided to go to work.

Example: He found his neighbor who lived next door to be attractive in appearance.

Corrected sentence: He found his neighbor attractive.

3) Faulty Parallelism

F*aulty parallelism* is a construction in which two or more parts of a sentence are roughly equivalent in meaning but not parallel (or grammatically similar) in form. Faulty parallelism most often occurs with paired constructions and items in a series.

Example: Physical and mental health and wellness rest on four pillars: regular exercise, healthy diet, social interaction, and *getting sufficient sleep*.

Corrected sentence: Physical and mental health rest on four pillars: regular exercise, healthy diet, social interaction, and sufficient sleep.

Example: Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method, while now the laboratory method is employed.

Corrected sentence: Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method; now it is taught by the laboratory method.

To correct faulty parallelism, match nouns with nouns, verbs with verbs, and phrases or clauses with similarly constructed phrases or clauses.

4) Misplaced & Dangling Modifiers

- A modifying word, phrase or clause should be placed next to the word it describes. In the following sentence, the modifying clause has been misplaced:

Example: She wore a bicycle helmet on her head *that was too large*.

Corrected sentence: She wore a bicycle helmet *that was too large* on her head.

- A modifying word or phrase that starts a sentence must be followed right away by the word it is meant to describe. Otherwise, the meaning of the sentence is changed, and the modifier is said to be dangling.

Example: Delighted with the movie, a conversation over coffee ended our evening.
        Was the conversation delighted with the movie??

Corrected sentence: Delighted with the movie, we ended our evening with a conversation over coffee.

5) Diction and word choice

Word choice is important in writing. In order to choose the right words, there are several general ideas and rules to keep in mind.

1) The purpose for writing & audience: All writing has a purpose, and the used diction should coincide with the purpose, based on the audience.

2) Specific jargon if writing in a specific field of study.

3) Avoidance of connotations, idioms, slang, archaic words & neologisms.

Connotations are images that a reader associates with certain words. These may often distract a reader and should be eliminated and replaced with words that have a simple denotation.

> Idioms are phrases, frequently used in everyday speech, but are almost always too informal for writing.
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> Slang is the use of words that are not actually defined in the dictionary, but are commonly used in communication. Jargon is a special type of slang, which is used in association with a certain group of people.
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> Archaic words are old words which are not often used anymore, and
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> neologisms are new words, which may not be understood by everyone. These are often considered types of slang as well.

Problems with clarity *are* a matter of word choice as illustrated below:

- **Misused words**—the word doesn't actually mean what the writer thinks it does.
  Example: Indians were a *monotonous* culture until French and British settlers arrived.
  Revision: Indians were a homogenous culture.

- **Words with unwanted connotations or meanings**.
  Example: I sprayed the ants in their private places.
  Revision: I sprayed the ants in their hiding places.

- **Using a pronoun when readers can't tell whom/what it refers to**.
  Example: My cousin Jake hugged my brother Trey, even though he didn't like him very much.
  Revision: My cousin Jake hugged my brother Trey, even though Jake doesn't like Trey very much.

- **Jargon or technical terms** that make readers work unnecessarily hard. These words are important terms if the audience shares the same field study, otherwise simplify the wording.
  Example: I am interested in exchanges across different cultures and social groups.
  Revision: I am interested in intercultural communication.

- **Loaded language**. Sometimes writers know what they mean by a certain word, but they have not ever spelled that out for readers. They rely too heavily on that word, perhaps repeating it often, without clarifying what they are talking about.
  Example: Society teaches young girls that beauty is their most important quality. In order to prevent eating disorders and other health problems, we must change society.
  Revision: Contemporary American popular media, like magazines and movies, teach young girls that beauty is their most important quality. In order to prevent eating disorders and other health problems, we must change the images and role models girls are offered.

References
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Hodges, John C. and Mary E. Whitten. Harbrace College Handbook. Tenth ed. New York: HBJ, 1986.