Style Sheets

Purpose
Style sheets are a useful self-directed, tool for writers who are concerned with grammar, punctuation, spelling, or other usage/mechanical problems. An individual style sheet has two purposes: (1) it provides a writer with a quick, handy resource to consult when she is unsure of the correct usage of a particular item, and (2) it provides a writer with an at-a-glance guide for correcting her most common errors during the editing stage of writing.

Creating and using an individual style sheet is not meant to stop a writer from making a mistake entirely; however, it is an excellent tool to help a writer expediently search for and fix typical, reoccurring errors before turning in a paper.

How to Use
To start your own style sheet, select one error that you know you have problems with and record it under its corresponding alphabet letter in a small notebook.

For example, if you have problems distinguishing between there, their, and they’re—you would record this error on a page labeled T, because all three words start with the letter T.

Under a heading like: there, their, they’re— you would write your explanation of how to use each of these words.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T’s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There, their, they’re</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There has here in it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their means belonging to someone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They’re can be replaced by they are</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reference guide
Creating an entry like this—with the explanation in your own words—makes a quick reference guide—a mini-handbook tailored to your needs—that you can use whenever you are unsure of the correct way to write something. Whenever you are unsure of which of these three words to use, you can turn to the T’s and look it up quickly.

Simply recording the error in your style sheet, though, is not enough to help you correct the error in the future, nor is it enough to stop you from making the error as you write. It is very, very difficult—and not very practical—to try to change the way your “draft-writing” mind works.

If you try to pay attention to all the possible errors you could be making while you are drafting a paper, you are diverting valuable attention from more foundational writing decisions that need to be made before any meaningful editing decisions can be adjudicated. Thinking about whether to use there, their, or they’re when you are trying to work out the sense of an argument only slows you down and, as often as not, causes you to get lost. Luckily, an individual style sheet lets you relax while you are draft-writing because you know you have a systematic method for coming back later to check for and repair any errant there, their, or they’re.

Proofreading tool
Before turning in any paper, begin at the beginning of your style sheet. Locate the first error you tend to make, use a tool like “Find
and Replace” on your computer and locate all possible occurrences of that error. Each time you locate an error—check your usage in the paper against the correct usage you have marked in your style sheet. If the usage in the paper matches the usage on the style sheet, leave it alone and move on; if, on the other hand, your usage is incorrect, use the notes you have made on your style sheet to correct it before turning in the paper.

The overall goal here is not to learn how to avoid errors completely; that is not a realistic goal. The best writers and speakers make errors all the time—especially when they are working out new or complicated ideas. The only difference between a good writer and a poor writer is that the good writer reviews her work to check for, and remove, errors before sharing it with a public. By using your individual style sheet, as your style sheet grows in length, you will be able to look for and repair more and more errors.

A place to begin
When creating your style sheet, it is a good idea to look at your previously graded papers to view the teachers’ comments and see what mistakes they have marked on your papers. Looking back through your graded papers is a great way to see what mistakes you make from paper to paper.

Begin using the most frequent, reoccurring mistakes to create an individual style sheet. Because these are your most frequent mistakes, addressing them first will have the largest effect on your new papers. Then, whenever you get new comments, use these new comments to add items to your style sheet, so that it will continue to grow. The more complete and accurate your individual style sheet is the better your editing and proofreading skills will be.

Top Twenty Errors

In her handbook, EasyWriter, Andrea A. Lunsford has identified the twenty most frequent errors that college students make. If you have no graded papers to look back at, or if you are uncertain of what errors you tend to make, the top errors on this list would be a good place to start your style sheet.

Here is her list in order of frequency:

1. Missing comma after an introductory element

   - Determined to get the job done, we worked all weekend.
   - In German, nouns are always capitalized.

   Readers usually need a small pause between an introductory word, phrase, or clause and the main part of the sentence, a pause most often signaled by a comma. Try to get into the habit of using a comma after every introductory element. When the introductory element is very short, you don’t always need a comma after it. But you’re never wrong if you do use a comma.

2. Vague pronoun reference

   - Transmitting radio signals by satellite is a way of overcoming the problem of scarce airwaves and limiting how they are used.

   Does they refer to the signals or the airwaves? The editing clarifies what is being limited.
What does which refer to? The editing clarifies what employees resented.

A pronoun - a word such as she, yourself, her, it, this, who, or which - should clearly refer to the word or words it replaces (called the antecedent) elsewhere in the sentence or in a previous sentence. If more than one word could be the antecedent or if no specific antecedent is present in the sentence, edit to make the meaning clear.

3. Missing comma in a compound sentence

A compound sentence consists of two or more parts that could each stand alone as a sentence. When the parts are joined by a coordinating conjunction - and, but, so, yet, or, nor, or for - use a comma before the conjunction to indicate a pause between the two thoughts. In very short sentences, the comma is optional if the sentence can be easily understood without it. But you’ll never be wrong to use a comma.

4. Wrong word

Illusions means “false ideas or appearances,” and allusions means “references.”

Sedate means “composed, dignified,” and sedentary means “requiring much sitting.”

Wrong-word errors can involve mixing up words that sound alike, using a word with the wrong shade of meaning, or using a word with a completely wrong meaning. Many wrong-word errors are due to the improper use of homonyms - words that are pronounced alike but spelled differently, such as their and there.

5. Missing comma(s) with a nonrestrictive element

The reader does not need the clause who was the president of the club to know the basic meaning of the sentence: Marina was first to speak.

A nonrestrictive element - one that is not essential to the basic meaning of the sentence - could be removed and the sentence would still make sense. Use commas to set off any nonrestrictive parts of a sentence.
6. Wrong or missing verb ending

The United States \underline{\text{drop}} an atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945.

It's easy to forget the verb endings \text{-s} (or \text{-es}) and \text{-ed} (or \text{-d}) because they are not always pronounced clearly when spoken. In addition, some varieties of English use the endings in ways that are different from uses in academic and professional English.

7. Wrong or missing preposition

We met \underline{\text{on}} Union Street San Francisco.

\text{In} and \text{on} both show place, but use \text{on} with a street and \text{in} with a city.

President Richard Nixon compared the United States \underline{\text{to}} a “pitiful, helpless giant.”

\text{Compare to} means “regard as similar”; \text{compare with} means “to examine to find similarities or differences.”

Many words in English are regularly used with a particular \text{preposition} to express a particular meaning. Throwing a ball \underline{\text{to}} someone is different from throwing a ball \underline{\text{at}} someone. Because many prepositions are short and not stressed or pronounced clearly in speech, they are often accidentally left out or mixed up in writing.

8. Comma splice

Westward migration had passed Wyoming by, even the discovery of gold in nearby Montana failed to attract settlers.

I was strongly attracted to her, she had special qualities.

We hated the meat loaf, the cafeteria served it every Friday.

A \text{comma splice} occurs when only a comma separates \text{clauses} that could each stand alone as a sentence. To correct a comma splice, you can insert a semicolon or period, connect the clauses clearly with a word such as \text{and} or \text{because}, or restructure the sentence.

9. Missing or misplaced possessive apostrophe

Overambitious parents can be very harmful to a child’s well-being.

Pedro Martinez is one of the Mets’ most electrifying pitchers.

To make a noun \text{possessive}, add either an apostrophe and an \text{-s} (Ed’s book) or an apostrophe alone (the boys’ gym).
10. Unnecessary shift in tense

- A few countries produce almost all of the world’s illegal drugs, but addiction affected many countries.
- Priya was watching the great blue heron take off. Then she slips and falls into the swamp.

Verb tenses tell readers when actions take place: saying *Ron went to school* indicates a past action whereas saying *he will go* indicates a future action. Verbs that shift from one tense to another with no clear reason can confuse readers.

11. Unnecessary shift in pronoun

- When one first sees a painting by Georgia O’Keeffe, you are impressed by a sense of power and stillness.

An unnecessary pronoun shift occurs when a writer who has been using one pronoun to refer to someone or something shifts to another pronoun for no apparent reason.

12. Sentence fragment

- Marie Antoinette spent huge sums of money on herself and her favorites. And helped bring on the French Revolution.
- The old aluminum boat sitting on its trailer.

Sitting cannot function alone as the verb of the sentence. The auxiliary verb *was* makes it a complete verb.

- We returned to the drugstore, where we waited for our buddies.

A sentence fragment is part of a sentence that is written as if it were a whole sentence, with a capital letter at the beginning and a period, a question mark, or an exclamation point at the end. A fragment may lack a subject, a complete verb, or both. Other fragments may begin with a subordinating conjunction, such as *because*, and so depend for their meaning on another sentence. Reading your draft out loud, backwards, sentence by sentence, will help you spot sentence fragments.
13. Wrong tense or verb form

- By the time Ian arrived, Jill died.

The verb died does not clearly state that the death occurred before Ian arrived.

- Iris has gone to the store.

The verb go has irregular past-tense forms.

Errors of wrong tense include using a verb that does not clearly indicate when an action or a condition is, was, or will be completed - for example, using walked instead of had walked, or will go instead of will have gone. Errors of wrong form include confusing the forms of irregular verbs (such as go, went, and gone) or treating these verbs as if they followed the regular pattern - for example, using beginned instead of began.

14. Lack of subject-verb agreement

- A strategist behind the scenes creates the candidate’s public image.

The subject is the singular noun strategist, not scenes.

- Each of these designs coordinates with the others.

The subject is the singular pronoun each, not designs.

- There are two main reasons that I want to become a lawyer.

The subject, reasons, is plural, so the verb is plural.

- My brothers or my sister come every day to see Dad.

Here, the noun closest to the verb is singular (sister). The verb must agree with that singular noun.

- Johnson was one of the athletes who were disqualified.

Here, who refers to athletes, so the verb is plural.

A verb must agree with its subject in number and in person. In many cases, the verb must take a form depending on whether the subject is singular or plural: The old man is angry and stamps into the house, but The old men are angry and stamp into the house. Lack of subject-verb agreement is often just a matter of carelessly leaving the -s ending off the verb or of not identifying the subject correctly.

15. Missing comma in a series

- A strategist behind the scenes creates the candidate’s public image.

The subject is the singular noun strategist, not scenes.
When three or more items appear in a series, many disciplines require them to be separated from one another with commas. Although newspapers and magazines do not use a comma between the last two items, the best advice in writing other than journalism is to use a comma because a sentence can be ambiguous without one.

16. Lack of agreement between pronoun and antecedent

A collective noun can be either singular or plural, depending on whether the people are seen as a single unit or as multiple individuals.

- Every student must provide his own uniform.

With an antecedent that can refer to either a man or a woman, use his or her, he or she, and so on. When the singular antecedent refers to either a male or a female, you can also rewrite the sentence to make the antecedent and pronoun plural or to eliminate the pronoun altogether.

Pronouns must agree with their antecedents in gender (for example, using he or him to replace Abraham Lincoln and she or her to replace Queen Elizabeth) and in number.

17. Unnecessary comma(s) with a restrictive element

A restrictive element is essential to the basic meaning of the sentence. It is not set off from the rest of the sentence with commas.

People who wanted to preserve wilderness areas opposed the plan to privatize national parks.

The reader needs the clause who wanted to preserve wilderness areas because it announces which people opposed the plan. The clause should not be set off with commas.

18. Fused sentence
A fused sentence (also called a run-on sentence) is created when clauses that could stand alone as a sentence are joined with no punctuation or words to link them. Fused sentences must be either divided into separate sentences or joined by adding words or punctuation.

19. Misplaced or dangling modifier

Every modifier (whether a word, phrase, or clause) should be as close as possible to the word it describes or relates to. Misplaced modifiers may confuse your readers by seeming to modify some other element in the sentence.

Who was wearing the binoculars - the eagles?

Who was wearing the binoculars - the eagles?

A dangling modifier hangs precariously from the beginning or end of a sentence, attached to no other part of the sentence. The element that the phrase modifies may exist in your mind but not in your draft. Each modifier must refer to some other element in the sentence.

20. Its/It’s confusion

Use its to mean belonging to it; use it’s only when you mean it is or it has.

http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/easywriter3e/20errors/