Grammar & Style: Usage & Mechanics Cheat Sheet

A concise cheat sheet covering essential aspects of grammar, style, usage, and mechanics. It provides a quick reference for writers and editors to ensure clarity, correctness, and effective communication.

Subject-Verb Agreement & Pronoun Usage

Subject-Verb Agreement

Singular Subjects:	Use a singular verb. Example: *He runs.*
Plural Subjects:	Use a plural verb. Example: *They run.*
Compound Subjects (and):	Usually plural. Example: *John and Mary run.*
Compound Subjects (or/nor):	Agree with the subject closest to the verb. Example: *Neither John nor his brothers run.*
Indefinite Pronouns (singular):	Each, either, neither, everyone, someone, nobody, etc. Example: *Everyone runs.*
Indefinite Pronouns (plural):	Several, few, both, many. Example: *Many run.*
Collective Nouns:	Can be singular or plural depending on context. Example: *The team is winning.* (singular, acting as a unit). *The team are arguing.* (plural, individual members).

Pronoun Agreement and Reference

Pronoun Agreement:	Pronouns must agree in number and gender with their antecedents. Example: *The dog wagged its tail.* (singular, neuter).
Clear Pronoun Reference:	Ensure each pronoun clearly refers to its intended antecedent. Avoid ambiguity. Example: *John told Bill that he was wrong.* (ambiguous). Better: *John told Bill, 'You are wrong.'*
Pronoun Case:	Use the correct case (subjective, objective, possessive). Example: *I went to the store.* (subjective). *The store gave the book to me.* (objective). *That is my book.* (possessive).
Who vs. Whom:	*Who* is subjective, *whom* is objective. Example: *Who is at the door? To whom did you give the book?*
Reflexive Pronouns:	Use only when the pronoun refers back to the subject. Example: *I hurt myself.* (correct). *Give the book to myself.* (incorrect, use *me*).

Verb Tense Consistency & Voice

Verb Tense Consistency

Maintaining Tense:	Keep verb tenses consistent within a sentence and paragraph unless there's a logical reason to change. Example: *I went to the store and bought milk.* (past tense consistent).
Sequence of Tenses:	Use the correct sequence of tenses to show relationships between events. Example: *I had finished my work before he arrived.* (past perfect + past simple).
Avoiding Unnecessary Shifts:	Avoid shifting tenses without a clear reason. Example: *I went to the park, and I see many ducks.* (incorrect). Corrected: *I went to the park, and I saw many ducks.*

Active vs. Passive Voice

Active Voice:	The subject performs the action. Clear and direct. Example: *The dog chased the ball.*
Passive Voice:	The subject receives the action. Can be used to de-emphasize the actor or emphasize the action. Example: *The ball was chased by the dog.*
When to Use Passive:	When the actor is unknown or unimportant. Example: *The window was broken.* (actor unknown).
Avoiding Overuse of Passive:	Overuse can make writing weak and indirect. Prefer active voice when possible. Example: *Mistakes were made.* (passive, vague). Better: *We made mistakes.* (active, direct).

Punctuation Essentials

Commas

Commas in Lists:
Use commas to separate items in a list. *Example: I need milk, bread, and eggs.* (Oxford comma optional but recommended).

Commas with Coordinating Conjunctions:
Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet) that joins two independent clauses. *Example: I wanted to go, but I was too tired.*

Commas after Introductory Elements:
Use a comma after an introductory word, phrase, or clause. *Example: However, I decided to stay home.*

Commas with Nonessential Information:
Use commas to set off nonessential (nonrestrictive) phrases or clauses. *Example: My brother, who lives in Chicago, is a doctor.*

Comma Splices:
Avoid joining two independent clauses with only a comma. Use a semicolon, a coordinating conjunction, or separate the clauses into two sentences. *Incorrect: I went to the store, it was closed.*

Semicolons & Colons

Semicolons:	Join two closely related independent clauses. *Example: The sun was shining; the birds were singing.*
Colons:	Introduce a list, explanation, or example. *Example: I need three things: milk, bread, and eggs.*
Semicolons vs. Commas:	Use semicolons when the clauses are closely related and a coordinating conjunction isn't used. Use commas with coordinating conjunctions.
Colons for Emphasis:	Can emphasize the information that follows. *Example: There was only one thing to do: run!*

Apostrophes

Possession:	Show possession. *Example: John's car, the dog's bone.*
Contractions:	Indicate missing letters in contractions. *Example: can't, don't, it's.*
Plural Possessive:	Show possession for plural nouns. *Example: the students' desks.*
Its vs. It's:	*Its* is possessive, *it's* is a contraction of *it is*. *Example: The dog wagged its tail. It's a beautiful day.*

Common Usage Errors

Affect vs. Effect

Affect:	Usually a verb, meaning to influence. *Example: The weather will affect our plans.*
Effect:	Usually a noun, meaning a result. Can also be a verb meaning to bring about. *Example: The effect of the rain was flooding. He will effect change.*

There, Their, & They're

There: Indicates a place or existence. *Example: The book is over there. There are many stars in the sky.*
Their: Possessive pronoun. *Example: Their car is red.*
They're: Contraction of *they are*. *Example: They're going to the party.*

To, Too, & Two

To: Preposition indicating direction or purpose. *Example: I am going to the store.*
Too: Means *also* or *excessively*. *Example: I am going too. It is too hot.*
Two: The number 2. *Example: I have two cats.*

Your vs. You're

Your:	Possessive pronoun. *Example: Your book is on the table.*
You're:	Contraction of *you are*. *Example: You're going to be late.*

Then vs. Than

Then:	Indicates time or sequence. *Example: I went to the store, then I went home.*
Than:	Used for comparisons. *Example: I am taller than you.*