

Read this before you submit your next essay.

In many borderline essays, the difference between a good grade and an excellent one is not the argument. It is surface control. Markers rarely comment on grammar when it works. They comment when it distracts.

This **Core Edition** marks the beginning of the redesigned Scrib. collection. It brings together ten grammar patterns that most frequently weaken otherwise strong essays.

They are not advanced refinements. They are foundational controls.

If they recur, they quietly lower marks.

Use this guide as a final structural scan before submission.

1. Comma Splices

Two complete sentences joined by a comma.

What this signals to a marker: Unstable sentence structure.

Before: *The results were statistically significant, the sample size was limited.*

After: *The results were statistically significant; however, the sample size was limited.*

Or: *The results were statistically significant, but the sample size was limited.*

A comma alone cannot carry two independent clauses.

2. Which vs. That

Defining vs. Additional Information

What this signals: Imprecision in clause control.

Before: *The policy which was introduced in 2015 transformed funding structures.*

After (defining clause): *The policy that was introduced in 2015 transformed funding structures.*

After (non-defining clause): *The policy, which was introduced in 2015, transformed funding structures.*

If removing the clause changes the meaning, use that.

3. Apostrophes

Possession vs. Contraction

What this signals: Visible inattention to detail.

Before: *The company revised it's sustainability strategy. Several theory's were proposed.*

After: *The company revised its sustainability strategy. Several theories were proposed.*

Apostrophe errors are small – but they signal carelessness.

4. Fewer vs. Less

Countable vs. Uncountable

What this signals: Basic grammatical distinction.

Before: *There were less participants in the second trial.*

After: *There were fewer participants in the second trial.*

If you can count the noun individually, use fewer.

5. Dangling Modifiers

Who is performing the action?

What this signals: Ambiguity at sentence level.

Before: *After reviewing the literature, the conclusion appears inevitable.*

After: *After reviewing the literature, the researcher concludes that the outcome appears inevitable.*

The modifying phrase must clearly refer to the subject.

6. Pronoun Precision

Who / Whom / Whose / Who's

What this signals: Uncertainty in grammatical role.

Before: *The students whom submitted the proposal were shortlisted.*

After: *The students who submitted the proposal were shortlisted.*

Identify whether the pronoun functions as subject or object before choosing.

7. Hyphen (-), En Dash (–), Em Dash (—)

What this signals: Attention to detail — or lack of it.

Before: *The 2018-2022 reforms reshaped policy. This approach - while controversial - gained support.*

After: *The 2018–2022 reforms reshaped policy. This approach — while controversial — gained support.*

Precision in punctuation signals structural awareness.

8. Overusing *However*

What this signals: Weak paragraph transitions.

Before: *However, the data was incomplete. The sample size was limited, however, and therefore the results should be interpreted cautiously. However, the findings remain significant.*

After: *Although the data was incomplete and the sample size limited, the findings remain significant and should be interpreted cautiously.*

Transitions should reflect reasoning – not habit.

9. Excess *That* Constructions

What this signals: Repetitive sentence structure.

Before: *The study argues that the data suggests that reform is necessary.*

After: *The study argues the data suggests reform is necessary.*

Remove *that* where clarity remains intact. Economy strengthens fluency.

10. Adverb Placement

Meaning depends on position.

What this signals: Potential ambiguity.

Before: *Students only revise the core texts.*

Here, it's not clear whether *only* modifies *students* or *revise*.

If you mean only the students (not lecturers, tutors, etc.) revise the core texts:

After: Only students revise the core texts. (= It is students, and not others, who do the revising.)

If you mean students revise only the core texts (and nothing else):

After: Students revise only the core texts. (= They revise the core texts and nothing beyond them.)

Place adverbs directly next to what they modify. Meaning depends on position.

Final Note

Grammar alone does not secure top marks. But repeated surface errors quietly cap performance. Strong academic writers build a habit of checking for structural control before submission.

Turn the page and run the **Pre-Submission Precision Scan** before you upload your work.

Pre-Submission Precision Scan

Run immediately before uploading.

Scan quickly. If a pattern appears more than twice, revise.

Sentence boundaries	No comma joining two complete sentences.	
Clause definition	<i>That</i> defines. <i>Which</i> adds (with commas).	
Apostrophes	<i>Its</i> ≠ <i>it's</i> . No plural apostrophes.	
Quantifiers	Fewer = countable. Less = uncountable.	
Modifier attachment	Introductory phrases clearly attach to the subject.	
Pronouns	<i>Who</i> (subject). <i>Whom</i> (object). <i>Whose</i> (possession). <i>Who's</i> = <i>who is</i> .	
Punctuation control*	Hyphen (compound). En dash (range). Em dash (interruption).	
Transition variety	Avoid repeated <i>however</i> . Transitions reflect logic.	
Economy	Remove unnecessary <i>that</i> .	
Adverb position	Place next to what is modified.	

*Usage rules for hyphens and dashes differ across style guides. Check your university's guidelines and apply them consistently.