Definitions in a Nutshell

A

**action verb:** a verb that animates a sentence, either physically or mentally.

**active voice:** see voice.

**additive phrase:** an expression typically set off with commas, that while it seems to be part of the subject is not, and therefore does not change the number of the verb.

**adjective:** a word that modifies a noun, pronoun.

**adverb:** a word that modifies a noun, pronoun, or another adverb.

**adverbial clause:** subordinate clauses that begin with subordinate conjunctions; they function as adverbs within the sentence and cannot stand alone as sentences.

**agreement:** see pronoun agreement or subject-predicate agreement.

**antecedent:** the noun or group of words acting as a noun to which the pronoun refers.

**appositive:** a word or group of words that restates or identifies the noun or pronoun it is next to.

**audience:** refers to the reader at the other end of your writing; you should consider your audience's position and experiences when deciding on the appropriate language, style, and tone for your essay.

C

**case:** refers to the way a noun or pronoun is used in a phrase, clause, or sentence; case can be subjective, objective, or possessive.

**clause:** a group of related words, but unlike a phrase, a clause has a subject and predicate.

**cliché:** trite, overused expressions, many of which rely on figurative language and should be avoided in writing.
**collective noun**: a word that stands for a group of things is called a collective noun.

**colon**: used primarily when introducing a list, introducing a quotation or formal statement, or introducing a restatement or explanation.

**comma**: the most frequently used internal punctuation in sentences; commas are used after introductory clauses and phrases, with restrictive and nonrestrictive elements, with appositives, between items in a series, between modifiers in a series, to join independent clauses, and to set off interrupting elements.

**comma splice**: see run-on sentence.

**comparative degree**: used with adjectives and adverbs to compare two people, things, or actions.

**complement (predicate nominative or predicate adjective)**: an element in a predicate that identifies or describes the subject; a complement can be either a noun (called a predicate noun or predicate nominative), or an adjective (called a predicate adjective).

**complete predicate**: the verb or verb phrase and the words that modify or complete it.

**complete subject**: the noun or pronoun and the words that modify or complete it.

**complex sentence**: contains one independent clause and one or more subordinate clauses.

**compound adjectives**: adjectives that are hyphenated when they appear before a noun.

**compound adverbs**: while most compound adverbs are written as two words, those beginning with over or under are spelled as one word.

**compound-complex sentence**: joins two or more independent clauses with one or more subordinate clauses.

**compound preposition**: prepositions made up of more than one word.

**compound sentence**: has two or more independent clauses, joined by coordinating conjunctions, and no subordinate clauses.

**compound subjects**: refers to more than one actor in a sentence.

**compound word**: combination of two words can create a spelling problem; a dictionary is your best guide to correct spelling.

**conclusions**: the final paragraph or paragraphs of an essay, and should give a reader a sense of completion.
**conjunction:** words that join or link elements.

**conjunctive (sentence) adverbs:** words that look like coordinating conjunctions but are actually adverbs.

**coordinating conjunction:** (and, but, for, nor, or, so, and yet) join words, phrases, or clauses that are grammatically equal in rank.

**correlative conjunction:** conjunctions that come in matched pairs, like not only/but also.

**D**

**dangling modifiers:** are similar to misplaced modifiers except that the modifier is not just separated from the word it modifies; it is missing the word it modifies.

**dash:** a punctuation device used to interrupt a sentence, or introduce a restatement or explanation.

**demonstrative pronoun:** (this, that, these, those) single out what you are talking about.

**direct object:** a noun that receives the action of the sentence but that is not the subject.

**draft:** a written version of an essay; most writers create multiple drafts in the process of writing.

**E**

**ellipsis:** indicates an omission from a quotation.

**elliptical clause:** a clause in which a word or words have been omitted.

**euphemism:** a mild or roundabout word or phrase used in place of one considered painful or offensive.

**exclamation point:** follow interjections and other expressions of strong feeling; they may also lend force to a command.

**F**

**faddish words:** terms that appear suddenly and become very popular in language; some last, some fade, and some disappear altogether.

**faulty parallelism:** a failure to create grammatically parallel structures when appropriate, is referred to as faulty parallelism.

**figurative idiom:** expressions so common that they have become clichés.
future perfect: a verb tense that indicates action in a future time in relation to another time farther in the future; it is formed with will have and the past participle of the verb.

future tense: a verb tense that indicates the action has yet to take place

G

gerund: a noun created from the -ing form of a verb; gerunds act as subjects and objects in sentences.

gerund phrase: phrases that begin with the -ing form of a verb and have objects and modifiers; a gerund phrase always acts as a noun in a sentence, not as an adjective.

I

idiom: an accepted phrase or expression that doesn't follow the usual patterns of language, or has a meaning other than the literal.

imperative: refers to the mood of the verb used in requests and commands.

indefinite pronouns: (all, any, he, she, it, and so on) stand in for nouns but do not specify the persons or things to which they refer.

independent clause: a clause that contains a subject and a predicate, expresses a complete thought, and can stand alone as a sentence.

indicative: refers to a mood of the verb that is used in most statements and questions.

indirect object: tells to or for whom an action is done, although the words to and for are not used; it is used with a transitive verb and precedes the direct object.

indirect question: a question that is being reported rather than asked and ends with a period rather than a question mark.

infinitive: the base form of a verb with to, and that usually functions as a noun, although it can be an adjective or adverb.

infinitive phrase: a phrase containing an infinitive and its objects and modifiers; infinitive phrases usually function as nouns, although they can be used as adjectives and adverbs.

intensifiers: words intended to add force to what you say.

interjection: words that express a burst of emotion but are not grammatically related to other elements in a sentence.

interrogative pronoun: (who, whom, whose, which, what) introduce questions.
**intransitive verb:** verbs that do not take an object.

**introduction:** beginnings of essays that establish the purpose and tone; introductions should attract the reader's attention and guide the reader naturally into the rest of the paper.

**irregular verb:** verbs that form the past tense and past participle in a variety of ways, but not by adding -d or -ed as regular verbs do.

**J**

**jargon:** the specialized language of a field or profession.

**L**

**linking verb:** verbs that do not convey action but help complete statements about the subject by describing or identifying it.

**M**

**misplaced modifier:** modifiers that do not clearly relate to the word they are modifying.

**modifier:** describes or limits another word or group of words.

**mood:** refers to the manner or attitude of the speaker which the verb intends to convey; verbs have three moods: indicative, imperative, or subjunctive.

**N**

**noun:** a word that names a person, place, or thing, and can be either concrete or abstract.

**noun clause:** a clause that serves as a noun in a sentence.

**number:** refers to whether a noun or verb is singular or plural.

**O**

**object of the preposition:** a noun or pronoun that follows a preposition and completes the prepositional phrase.

**objective case:** when a noun or pronoun is the object of a verb, it is in the objective case.

**outline:** establishes an overall pattern of organization for an essay; they may be formal or informal but are essential to good writing.

**P**
paragraph: develops one idea with a series of logically connected sentences and may vary in length.

paragraph coherence: the smooth logical flow of a paragraph.

paragraph unity: a paragraph that focuses on one idea and one idea only.

parallelism: refers to matching grammatical structures; elements in a sentence that have the same function or express similar ideas should be grammatically parallel, or grammatically matched.

paraphrase: involves borrowing an idea that you rephrase in your own words.

parentheses: punctuation devices used to set off incidental information.

participle: a verb that ends in -ing (present participle) or -ed, -d, -t, -en, -n (past participle).

participial phrase: begins with a past or present participle and is followed by its object and modifiers; participial phrases are used as adjectives.

parts of speech: there are eight parts of speech: noun, verb, pronoun, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, and interjection.

passive voice: see voice.

past perfect: a verb tense indicating action in past times in relation to another past time; it is formed with had and the past participle of the verb.

past tense: a verb tense indicating that an action is finished or complete.

period: punctuation device used with statements, requests, mild exclamations, courtesy questions, and abbreviations.

person: refers to the person (or thing) that is a subject or object; person can be either first (I, me, my, mine), second (you, your), or third (he, she, him, her, it, they).

personal pronoun: (I, me, he, she, it, and so on) stand in for one or more persons or things and differ in form depending upon their case.

phrase: a group of related words that have no subject-predicate combination and cannot stand alone as a sentence.

plagiarism: the use of another writer's words or ideas without acknowledging that person's contribution.

possessive case: the case of a noun or pronoun used to show ownership.
**predicate:** part of a sentence that tells what the subject does or is, or what is done to the subject.

**prefix**

**preposition:** shows the relationship between a noun or pronoun and another noun or pronoun.

**prepositional idiom:** an expression that depends on the choice of a particular preposition.

**prepositional phrase:** a phrase that begins with a preposition and includes a noun or pronoun that is the object of the preposition.

**present perfect:** a verb tense that indicates action in past time in relation to present time; it is formed with has or have and the past participle of the verb.

**present tense:** a verb tense that indicates the action is occurring now.

**pronoun:** a word that stands in for a noun.

**pronoun agreement:** a pronoun must agree with its antecedent in number (singular or plural) and gender (masculine or feminine).

**pronoun case:** refers to the way a pronoun is used in a sentence (see subjective, objective or possessive case).

**proper noun:** names a specific person or place, or a particular event or group and is always capitalized.

**punctuation:** helps a reader make sense of what you write; punctuation devices include periods, question marks, exclamation points, commas, semicolons, colons, dashes, parentheses, and brackets.

**Q**

**question mark:** used to end questions.

**quotation marks:** used to indicate to the reader that the words or sentences within the quotation marks are borrowed from another writer.

**R**

**redundancy:** the unnecessary repetition of words, phrases, or ideas in writing.

**reflexive (intensive) pronoun:** combines a personal pronoun with -self or -selves in order to reflect nouns or pronouns, or to provide emphasis.
**relative clause:** a clause that begins with a relative pronoun and functions as an adjective.

**relative pronoun:** (who, whom, which, that) introduce clauses that describe nouns or pronouns.

**run-on sentence:** or comma splice is an error in which two independent clauses are joined without the proper punctuation.

**semicolon:** punctuation device used to join independent clauses between items in a series.

**sentence:** a group of words containing a subject and a predicate and expressing a complete thought.

**sentence fragment:** a group of words that is missing a subject, a predicate, or does not express a complete thought.

**simple predicate:** a verb or verb phrase.

**simple sentence:** has one independent clause and no subordinate clauses.

**simple subject:** a noun or pronoun.

**slang:** conversational or informal language, which should generally be avoided in formal writing.

**split infinitives:** breaking up an infinitive with one or more adverbs.

**subject:** part of a sentence that tells what or whom the sentence is about.

**subjective (nominative) case:** when a noun or pronoun is the subject of a verb.

**subject-predicate agreement:** a predicate must agree in person and in number with its subject, regardless of other elements in a sentence.

**subordinate (dependant) clause:** a clause that does not express a complete thought and is not a sentence; it depends upon something else to express a complete thought.

**subjunctive:** refers to the mood of the verb used in sentences that are contrary-to-fact or hypothetical.

**subordinating conjunctions:** join subordinate clauses to independent clauses.

**suffix**
superlative: degree used with adjectives and adverbs to compare more than two things, people, or actions.

tense: refers to the time in which the action, or state of being of the verb, is taking place.

topic: the general idea or area of an essay; provides the subject of the essay.

transitive verbs: a verb that takes a direct object; that is, the verb transmits action to an object.

thesis: a sentence or group of sentences that make an assertion about the topic; it is usually found in the introduction and may be directly stated or implied.

verbal: words derived from verbs but that function differently from a verb (see infinitives, participles, and gerunds).

verb: conveys the action performed by a subject, expresses the state of that subject, or links the subject to a complement.

verb agreement: see agreement.

voice: refers to the form of a verb indicating whether the subject performs the action (active voice) or receives the action (passive voice).

wordy expression: expressions that say the same thing twice or avoid getting directly to the point.

Source: Cliffnotes
On March 20, 2006 by Charlotte Lewis.

NOTE: If you think a specific word/definition should be added to this list, please send an email to Joel Bisser at bisser@csp.edu. Thank you.