



Grammar: Category Error

A category error is a kind of grammar mistake where a noun is used as a subject of a verb that it can't logically do. This kind of mistake most often pops up when students are writing about research.

Identifying Errors

- Ask yourself: can the noun logically do the verb it's being paired with in this sentence?
 - Ex. The curtains flew around the room.
 - Can curtains fly? No. So we have a category error.
 - Ex. The book talked about the Civil War.
 - Can books talk? No. So we have a category error.

Resolving Errors

- Remember that research is conducted by humans, and category errors often result when we forget about the people behind the research.
- Category errors can be resolved a few different ways: choose a more appropriate noun, choose a more appropriate verb, or revise the structure of the sentence entirely.

Examples & Revisions

- The intervention found that mindfulness led to greater well-being.
 - The researchers found that mindfulness led to greater well-being.
- The data concluded that a growth mindset was related to higher grades.
 - The data showed that a growth mindset was related to higher grades.
- The manipulation found that gratitude lists increased moods more than lists of daily activities.
 - The researchers found that people who wrote gratitude lists had increased moods more than people who made lists of daily activities.
 - People who wrote gratitude lists had moods that increased more than those who made lists of daily activities.

Speaking and Writing Center [1]: These sorts of phrases may be appropriate in creative writing, as they can function as figurative language (such as metaphors and personification), but they would not be appropriate for research or academic writing in which figurative language is not suitable.

Speaking and Writing Center [2]: The two examples below are valid uses of figurative language, and thus appropriate in some contexts, but they are being used here as basic demonstration of what is meant by category errors.

Speaking and Writing Center [3]: Research discussion would be one of the most important contexts in which to be aware of category errors, as you need to be intentional as to who exactly was doing things, which would be humans and not inanimate objects or ideas.

Speaking and Writing Center [4]: Interventions cannot find things. They can affect things, but they cannot themselves make findings.

Speaking and Writing Center [5]: Researchers, however, can find things based off of a performed intervention. This error was resolved by choosing a more appropriate noun.

Speaking and Writing Center [6]: Data cannot make conclusions about itself. Data can show or suggest something, but ultimately it is the people analyzing the data that must make the conclusions.

Speaking and Writing Center [7]: Data can, however, show things. This error was resolved by choosing a more appropriate verb.

Speaking and Writing Center [8]: Manipulations cannot find anything because manipulations themselves are incapable of making conclusions.

Speaking and Writing Center [9]: Researchers, however, can find what manipulation demonstrated.

Speaking and Writing Center [10]: Or, the subjects of the study can be also be the subject of the sentence.