

**PROFESSOR
KABAY'S LIST
OF
FREQUENTLY
CORRECTED
ERRORS
IN ENGLISH**

**Version 50
(2025-02-18)**

M. E. Kabay, PhD

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<http://www.mekabay.com/methodology/fce.pdf>

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To the horror of Anglos in Westmount High School, I won the *Angus Bernard Medal in English* upon graduation in 1966 for having the highest matriculation-exam score in the class despite having French as my native language. Fellow graduate students at McGill University and Dartmouth College noticed my habit of correcting them, so I've been editing technical writing since 1970 and have seen that particular errors keep popping up in many writers' and especially students' papers in undergraduate courses and in graduate seminars. I've been collecting the comments I make about these errors over many years to help my students (as well as defining macros for popping comments into their papers) and hope that you will find some of these pointers helpful in your own writing.

I suggest using the Contents as a checklist; e.g., "Oh I know that..." vs "What's THAT about??" In the latter case, you can just double-click on the entry to go straight to the right page.

My brilliant wife, Dr Deborah N. Black, MD, contributed dozens of what she calls "egregious errors" that she encountered in her career in neurology. I have put [DNB] in each of her contributions and included date and source where possible.

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

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Frequently Corrected Errors in English

1 absence vs (in contrast to) abstinence

“The patient appears to be severely psychotic and shows almost a complete *abstinence* of insight and judgment.” [DNB] (note in psychiatric chart Jan '08)

Absence is the opposite of *presence*.

The complete absence of alcohol was notable.

Abstinence means avoidance of something.

He believed in complete abstinence from alcohol.

2 acronyms defined on first use

Define each acronym on first use in an essay or publication even if you have defined it in previous essays. Use the acronym consistently throughout the rest of the paper. For example, I define “vs” as “in contrast to” in the first entry of this list.

3 acronym plurals do not take an apostrophe

The plural of *ACL* is *ACLs*, not *ACL's*; that of MMPORPG is MMPORPGs.

4 acronyms to be used later

When you define an acronym on its first use, you should generally *use it consistently* later in the paper or chapter.

5 ado vs adew

“Without further adew” (ANPA meeting 2017). [DNB]

Ado means fuss or bother. If the word existed, *adew* would presumably mean *covered in dew*.

6 affect or effect?

In general use, *affect* is only used as a verb, whereas *effect* is commonly used as a noun and only in formal contexts as a verb. What causes confusion is that they have very similar pronunciations and closely related meanings.

If one thing *affects* [acts upon] another, it has *an effect* on it [causes it to change].

Notice also that you can *affect* [cause a change in] people as well as things, but you can only *effect* [bring about] things such as changes:

The election has affected our entire society, for it has effected major changes in the government.

The bad weather has a bad effect [not affect] on him.

There are technical meanings of the word *affect* that make the confusion worse. In psychology, *affect* refers to feelings or emotions. Thus,

The autistic child lacked visible signs of affect.

7 all of which

Don't start a sentence with *all of which*. You can link the first and the second parts with a comma.

WRONG: I realized that I had no money in my wallet and my friend discovered that she had lost her purse sometime in the last two hours. All of which caused serious problems when we tried to get across the lake on the ferry.

RIGHT: I realized that I had no money in my wallet and my friend discovered that she had lost her purse sometime in the last two hours, all of which caused serious problems when we tried to get across the lake on the ferry.

8 altogether vs all together

He was altogether incompetent. [=thoroughly]

She and her friends were all together when the flying saucer landed. [= together without exception]

9 although, while or whereas?

While is best used for duration. In contrast, *although* instantly makes it clear to the reader that you mean to provide a clarification whereas *while* leaves a momentary confusion about your meaning. Here's a subtle example in which the first version is intended to show concurrency whereas the second version emphasizes an unexpected feature:

Concurrency: While I was shopping, I was listening to an interesting program through my earbuds.

Contrast: Although I was shopping, I was also listening to an interesting program through my earbuds.

WRONG: While the bank robber was young, the robbery was expertly done.

RIGHT: Although the bank robber was young, the robbery was expertly done.

The first example implies that the robberies were expertly done only when the robber was young.

The second correctly makes a contrast between expectations and reality.

Whereas also emphasizes contrast:

WRONG: The first tool fixes flats, *while* the second fixes loose bolts.

RIGHT: The first tool fixes flats, *whereas* the second fixes loose bolts.

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10 amount vs number?

Amount is for what is measured; *number* is for what's counted.
E.g.,

WRONG: an amount of kangaroos vs

RIGHT: a number of kangaroos;

RIGHT: an amount of sugar vs

WRONG: a number of sugar.

11 and creates a compound subject

The moment you link two nouns that are subjects with *and* you have created a compound *plural* subject.

Means, motive and opportunity are [*not is*] the basis for prosecution.

Keep track of the *number* (singular or plural) of your subject when using a verb.

12 apostrophes don't create plurals

The apostrophe creates a *possessive* (except for *it / its*) or is part of a contraction (*does, doesn't*).

WRONG: Shoe's for sale

RIGHT: Shoes for sale

RIGHT: I don't like grammar mistakes.

13 appraise v apprise

To "appraise" means to evaluate.

To "apprise" means to inform.

WRONG: The public should be appraised of the issue.

RIGHT: The public should be apprised of the issue.

RIGHT: The appraisal of the house was correct.

14 as and like

WRONG: Like I said....

RIGHT: As I said....

As is usually a *conjunction* that introduces a clause:

RIGHT: As I was saying, the red car sped through the intersection without stopping.

Like is usually a preposition that takes an object:

RIGHT: The red car sped through the intersection like a cannonball.

As is also used as a preposition in the expression "...as ... as...."

RIGHT: The red car sped through the intersection as fast as a cannonball.

15 as such

Here, the cliché *as such* implies that you *are* a physical therapy appointment!☺

WRONG: I have a physical-therapy appointment tomorrow at 1:30 and as such will not be able to make class.

RIGHT: I have a physical-therapy appointment tomorrow at 1:30 and therefore will not be able to make class.

RIGHT: I was convicted of being a dangerous grammar pedant. As such, I am restricted to no more than one correction per day of errors in grammar.

This last example could be rewritten:

RIGHT: I was convicted as a dangerous grammar pedant and as such, I am restricted to no more than one correction per day of errors in grammar.

As such in this last example *correctly* means, "...and as a dangerous grammar pedant...."

16 askance vs asconce

"He looked asconce at the camera." [DNB] (2018 comment in an Internet discussion)

Askance means sideways or crookedly.

RIGHT: He looked askance at the camera.

A *sconce* is a holder for a candlestick.

RIGHT: He threw a sconce at the camera.

Asconce is not a valid word in English.

17 assure vs ensure vs insure

I *assure* someone that I am paying attention; I *ensure* that someone pays attention in class by putting electrodes in their seat and applying shocks when they start falling asleep or looking at their smartphone.

One *assures* someone; one *ensures* a result.

WRONG: I will assure that security improves.

RIGHT: I will ensure that security improves.

WRONG: I ensured her of our competence.

RIGHT: I assured her of our competence.

To *insure* means to provide insurance.

RIGHT: I will insure the house against fire.

Sometimes *insure* is used as equivalent to *ensure*.

RIGHT: I will insure that the fire extinguishers work.

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18 automatically updated data fields

Don't use automatically updated date fields in essays – you'll have the current date substituted every time you save the file. Such usage is useful when you are trying to show when a file was last saved or edited but not if you are showing, say, a future submission date that should be fixed.

This particular document (*Frequently Corrected Errors*) is saved with a date field in the title page rather than a fixed date.

19 averse vs aversive

Averse means *objecting to* or *disliking*.

Aversive means causing dislike or discomfort.

WRONG: I wouldn't be aversive to recommending....
[DNB] (colleague's comment)

RIGHT: I wouldn't be averse to recommending....

RIGHT: A skunk's spray is highly aversive.

RIGHT: I am averse to skunk spray.

20 bated vs baited

Bated means *suspended* or *withheld*.

RIGHT: ... the public awaits the Mueller report with bated breath....

Baited means *including a bait*.

WRONG: As the American public awaits the Mueller report with baited breath ... [DNB] (*The Guardian* 2018).

RIGHT: He caught the fish using a baited hook.

21 battening down the hatches

The archaic word *batten* refers to narrow pieces of lumber used to strengthen a joint. *Battening down the hatches* is a cliché meaning *to strengthen in preparation for something dangerous*.

WRONG: "They were battling down the hatches."
[DNB] (BBC news 2010).

RIGHT: "They were battening down the hatches."

22 bent vs bend

Bent refers to a *preference*, *inclination* or *orientation*.

WRONG: The program has an integrated, cross-curriculum bend to attract students.

RIGHT: ...cross-curriculum bent....

23 breach / breech

A *breach* is a break.

RIGHT: The Equifax breach was the largest in history at the time.

RIGHT: The breach in the dam led to extensive flooding.

A *breech* is either the back of a gun barrel, part of a pulley, or trousers.

RIGHT: *Breeches* are trousers or shorts that go down to the knee.

24 by having . . . it

Never write "By having... it" if you intend "it" to refer to the fact indicated in the clause starting with "By having."

WRONG: *By having a large enough stock of products, it led to high profits.*

In the original sentence, the reader has to try to imagine exactly what is meant by "it" because that pronoun *cannot* point to the entire preceding clause. Using *it* to point mistakenly to the adverbial clause momentarily confuses the reader as (s)he looks for the precise antecedent of that pronoun – and cannot find one because *by having* isn't a noun (although *having* is a gerund – the noun version of a verb).

One could correctly write,

Having a large enough stock of products led to high profits

or

By having a large enough stock of products, we were able to make high profits

or

Having a large enough stock of products allowed us to make a high profit.

25 caliber vs caliper

Caliber refers to size.

A *caliper* is a tool with two adjustable lengths – e.g., tweezers.

WRONG: "As the plant matures the trunk will become woody and have a larger *caliper*." [DNB] (online gardening group)

RIGHT: ... have a larger caliber.

26 cannot vs can not

The correct way of writing *can not* is *cannot*.

RIGHT: I cannot emphasize this point enough to convince stubborn writers.

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

27 capitalization not for emphasis

Do not use capitalization as a form of emphasis. Capitalize only *proper nouns* (names such as those of laws, trademarks, organizations and so on).

WRONG: Information security depends on cooperation with Law Enforcement.

RIGHT: Information security depends on cooperation with law enforcement.

WRONG: The need for Information-Assurance Certification is growing.

RIGHT: The need for information-assurance certification is growing.

RIGHT: The *Global Information Assurance Certification*® (GIAC) granted by the Systems Administration and Network Security Institute (SANS) is growing in popularity.

Note that the name of the certification is italicized because that's the precise name.

WRONG: The evidence is that Computer Crime will be a major problem in the second decade of the 21st century.

RIGHT: The *Computer Crime Task Force* in Vermont is already a success.

Note that in the last example, the exact name of the task force is italicized even though it should have been named *Computer-Crime Task Force* with a hyphen for the compound adjective.

28 capitalize names of specific organizations

If you are writing about a specific, named organization, you should capitalize its name.

“The full names of institutions and companies and of their departments, and sometimes their short forms, are capitalized. A *the* preceding a name, even when part of the official title, is lowercased in running text. Such generic terms as *school* and *company* are usually lowercased when used alone but are sometimes capitalized to avoid ambiguity or for promotional purposes.” [*Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th Edition, p 338]

For example, one could write as follows if referring only to a specific university:

We find that the University privacy policies are strong.

But if one were discussing universities in general, one could write,

We find that the university privacy policies are strong.

More examples:

A university graduate program expects students to apply the highest standards of writing.

but

The University graduate program expects students to apply the highest standards of writing.

In the first sentence, the word *university* is a generic noun; in the second, *University* refers to a specific university (to be understood by the reader). Here's another example:

The President of the *University Faculty Council* is the spokesperson for the faculty.

A president of a university faculty council is the spokesperson for the faculty.

29 chapter in book

Normally a writer should be referring to a specific article or chapter (and its author and title), not to an entire reference work. You include the overall work by putting “in” and details after the specific information about that chapter. Often the page number is appropriate. Thus,

Somebody, F. (2016). “Impressive chapter title.” Chapter 345, page 1123 in Widget, P & R. Wadgett (2016), eds. *Handbook of Widgetry*, 4th edition. New York: Wiley.

The exact format depends on standards for the particular work; i.e., what an instructor or publisher requires.

30 cited or sited or sighted?

The book is *cited* three times in the article.

The castle is *sited* on the Isle of Wight.

Another word for *sited* is *situated*.

The bird was *sighted* three times on the Isle of Wight.

The institute's *web site* has a wealth of information.

31 colon before lists

Don't put a colon immediately after a verb or a preposition that introduces a list in a sentence; e.g.,

WRONG: “My list of commonly misused words includes: *affect*, *complimentary* and *utilize*.”

That sentence is correctly written without a colon as

RIGHT: “My list of commonly misused words includes *affect*, *complimentary* and *utilize*.”

One can also correctly use *the following* or *as follows*, with a colon, as in

“My list of commonly misused words includes the following: *affect*, *complimentary* and *utilize*.” [Thanks to Prof Don Holden.]

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32 colon to show explanation

In these examples of one of the suitable uses of the colon, the clause following the colon is an explanation or expansion of the clause preceding the colon.

RIGHT: He was a brilliant manager: his employees wanted to do well because they liked and respected him.

RIGHT: The conflict seemed insoluble: both sides were convinced that their view was the only possible valid perspective.

33 comma needed

The conjunctions “however,” “therefore,” “moreover,” and “nevertheless” are normally followed by a comma.

RIGHT: The opposing team consistently scored goals; however, we tried to defend our goalie.

RIGHT: The opposing team consistently scored goals; nevertheless, we tried to defend our goalie.

BUT CONSIDER THESE EXAMPLES:

RIGHT: The opposing team consistently scored goals however we tried to defend our goalie.

RIGHT: However we tried to defend our goalie, the opposing team consistently scored goals.

In these examples, “however” means “no matter how” and is **not** preceded by a semicolon or followed by a comma.

AND ANOTHER EXAMPLE:

RIGHT: The opposing team consistently scored goals; we tried to defend our goalie nevertheless.

Notice that the terminal *nevertheless* also has no semicolon or comma when it is used as an *afterthought* instead of as a critical conjunction.

34 complement vs compliment

The two words are close in spelling but their meanings are quite different. A *complement* is something added to perfect something and make it complete, whereas a *compliment* is an expression of praise:

A fine wine is the perfect complement to good cooking.

The cook received many compliments from the guests that evening.

Both words are also used as verbs, and both have adjectival forms: complementary and complimentary. *Complimentary* has the special meaning “given free”; and so

A complimentary copy of a book is one given without charge,

whereas

A complementary copy is one that completes a set of books.

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35 compound adjectives take hyphens

The 12th Edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style* admitted that hyphenating words is complicated:

“There are, quite literally, scores ...[or]... hundreds of ... rules for the spelling of compound words. Many of them are nearly useless because of the great number of exceptions.”¹

The authors of the current (15th edition) of the *Chicago Manual* provide an extensive table showing details of various types of hyphenation.²

The specific issue in this case is whether to hyphenate compound modifiers. The fundamental principle is that the hyphen helps to avoid even momentary doubt or confusion about the writer’s precise meaning.

For example, what is meant by *The large grained wood chest weighed a ton?* Does the writer mean that

(a) The chest was large and it was “grained?”

(b) The wood had large grain?

Using a hyphen in *The large-grained wood chest* eliminates all hesitation for the reader and immediately points to meaning (b).

So here are a few key rules about hyphenating (or not) compound adjectives:

- If the first word in a compound modifier is an *adverb*, don’t hyphenate the words. His **weakly uttered** words were nonetheless effective. She found the **poorly concealed** treasure behind the sink. *Professor Kabay’s Frequently Corrected Errors.*
- If the first word in a compound modifier is an adjective, hyphenate the words. His **weak-kneed** reaction was shameful. The **pink-toed** aardvark was astounding. The **frequent-errors** list.
- If the first word is a noun and the second is a present participle (verb form ending in *-ing*) then hyphenate the compound adjective. *The advertising-copywriter’s writing was irritation-producing twaddle.* (Note the radically different meaning of *irritation producing twaddle*.) *She is*

¹ *Chicago Manual of Style*, 12th Edition, Revised (1969). University of Chicago Press (ISBN 0-226-77008-7). §6.18, p 132.

² *Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th Edition, CD-ROM for Windows. Version 1.2.2. (2003). §7.90, p 302.

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building an awe-inspiring log cabin. They had an eye-watering meal at the Indian restaurant.

- Phrases used as modifiers should be hyphenated: The **first-in-line** effect... but He was **first in line**. A **once-in-a-lifetime** opportunity... but This opportunity comes only **once in a lifetime**.
- Compounds using a number and *-odd* use a hyphen. *There were a **hundred-odd** participants*. Contrast the meaning of *There were a **hundred odd** participants* which means something quite different (indeed, potentially insulting). [By the way, people with a stronger British component in their spoken language than people in the USA or Canada might use *an hundred*.]
- Numbers with a unit need a hyphen when used as modifiers. We were in a **twenty-mile** race. It is a **sixteen-ton** squasher used by Monty Python. That's the **eight-year-old** girl who is first in her math class.
- However, percentage does not take a hyphen: We've seen an **eight percent** decline in rhinoceros dung in the classrooms this year.
- Quasi-, half-, all- and cross- take hyphens in compound adjectives. That's a **quasi-legal** solution. It's a **half-hearted** approach. He's a high school **all-star** [team member]. Note that compound adjectives with all- keep the hyphen even if they follow the noun or are free-standing. She is a **cross-country** skier (but watch out for words with cross that have been joined together; e.g., crossword puzzle, crosscut saw).

36 **compose / comprise / consist of / constitute / include**

Comprise and consist of are concerned with a whole having a number of parts. **They are used in the active voice**, with the **whole as their subject** and the **parts as their object**:

The house comprises three bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, and a living room.

The meal consisted of several small dishes that everybody dipped into and shared.

Use of *comprise* in the sense "to constitute" is controversial.

Avoid constructions like the following if you wish to steer clear of criticism:

WRONG: The house is comprised of three bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, and a living room.

WRONG: Three bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, and a living room comprise the house.

If some rather than all the parts are mentioned, **include** may be used instead:

RIGHT: The house includes a kitchen and a living room on the first floor.

Compose and constitute are concerned with parts making up a whole. **Compose** is normally used in the **passive**, and **constitute** in the **active**:

RIGHT: *The team **is composed** of several experts in the field.*

RIGHT: *The following commodities **constitute** the average household diet.*

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37 **conditional vs indicative**

Don't use the *conditional* mood (*would, could*) when you need the *indicative* (stating that you **ARE** doing something). How would you react if your teacher wrote, "I would love to give you a 10/10 on this answer" but then gave you a zero? If you are happy to do something, say so. If you are in the process of doing something, saying that you *would* {like / be glad / love} to do it is just silly! The reader has to ask under what conditions you *would* do what you are stating.

WRONG: I *would* {like / be glad, love} to provide details to respond to your question. There are five issues....

RIGHT: I am glad to provide details to respond to your question. There are five issues....

RIGHT: I would love to answer your question in ten pages, but as you asked, I am providing only one page to start off the discussion.

38 **Cordon Bleu vs Gordon Blew**

"Chicken Gordon Blew" (menu in NYC restaurant). [DNB]

39 **cross-references**

In a published book, sometimes authors make reference to a previous source by either copying the reference outright (thus generating two identical footnotes or endnotes). Sometimes authors will refer to exactly the same point in a reference as in the immediately preceding reference; they use *ibid.* (stands for Latin *ibidem*, "the same"). If they are referring to the same work as in the immediately preceding reference but a different location, they use *op. cit.* (stands for Latin *opus citatum*, "the work cited"). However, I strongly recommend that you *not* use these forms. In an essay or manuscript where you may decide to change the order of materials or to introduce new references, you may find the backward references to be incorrect. Instead, use the **INSERT CROSS-REFERENCE** function of your word processor. In MS-Word, the function shows you a list of types of references (e.g., section headings, footnotes, tables) from which you can select a subset (usually footnotes) and then point to the specific cross-reference. You can then format the cross-reference to match other references according to your chosen style. All these cross-references will then automatically be adjusted if there are changes in the order or content of your text.

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

40 customer v costumer

“Their use of good costumer relations added value to their products.” [DNB]

It is conceivable that the phrase “good costumer relations” could be correct if it referred to relations with the people managing costumes....

41 dangling participle

WRONG: After biting me on the ankle, the dog-catcher put Fido in a cage.

Biting modifies the proximate (nearest) noun suitable as a subject, which in this case is *dog-catcher*. This error is known as a *dangling participle* and often causes amusement to readers aware of the problem. It’s unlikely that the dog-catcher really did bite the writer on the ankle!

RIGHT: After Fido bit me on the ankle, the dog-catcher put him in a cage

or, assuming you don’t object to passive voice,

RIGHT: After biting me on the ankle, Fido was put in a cage by the dog-catcher.

42 dilemma – not just any old choice

A *dilemma* has to be two *unpleasant* or *difficult* choices, not just a couple of options.

WRONG: I love both pizza and spaghetti, so I always have a dilemma when I go to the Italian restaurant.

RIGHT: I hate both pizza and spaghetti, so I always have a dilemma when my mate offers me a choice between the two.

43 data – singular or plural?

Because the meaning *data* is much like that of the singular noun *information*, and because its Latin *-a* plural announces the word’s plural status less plainly than a final *s* would, *data* is often treated as if it were singular. This use is common, and few now perceive it as wrong, especially given the word’s connotation of a collection or single unit made up of many informational subunits. All the same, in formal English, *Our data have been assembled over a number of years* would be regarded as correct, and commonly used constructions such as *very little data*, *the data shows...*, and *a great deal of data* would be regarded as incorrect.

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[MK adds: I don’t fight lost battles, and this one is over. Yes, the distinction between *information* and *data* is that the former implies a mass of knowledge whereas *data* implies a collection of specific, individual facts or observations. Thus *I have information about government corruption* implies non-quantitative knowledge (e.g., a source or indications) whereas *I have data*

about government corruption implies specific, quantitative information (e.g., exactly how much money a specific official received in bribes). However, at this point, most people have no clue that the distinction exists, so never mind. When imprecise people use specific words imprecisely, precise people may decide to stop using those words.]

44 e.g., i.e. & etc.

Do not confuse these two abbreviations, which mean different things and have different origins.

The abbreviation *e.g.*, meaning *for or as an example*, comes from the Latin expression *exempli gratia* (literally *for the sake of example*). Use it when you want to list a few typical examples of the thing mentioned: *I have the laboratory equipment that we need; e.g., [not i.e.] beakers, thermometers, and test tubes.*

Do not end a list that starts with e.g. with etc.

The abbreviation *etc.* stands for *et cetera* and means *and the rest*. Do not spell it *ect*; don’t leave out the period unless the house style consistently eliminates terminal periods in abbreviations.

The abbreviation *i.e.*, meaning “that is, that is to say,” comes from the Latin expression *id est* (“that is”). Use it when you want to give a more precise description of the thing mentioned: *The hearing, i.e., [not e.g.] the preliminary hearing, is set for noon Friday.*

Two periods punctuate *e.g.* and *i.e.* in U.S. English, whereas they may be unpunctuated in British English [e.g, ie,...]. [Follow] these abbreviations with commas.

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If you begin a *clause* with *e.g.* or *i.e.*, use a semicolon before the abbreviation; e.g., *This sentence itself illustrates the point in question; i.e., the sentence is self-referential.*

Avoid starting a sentence with either of these abbreviations.

45 elisions and interpolations

If you are quoting material and choose to leave out words within a sentence, replace the missing text with a three-dot ellipsis.

If you leave out material that crosses a sentence boundary, you must use a *four-dot ellipsis*.

If you insert clarifying text of your own, surround the insertion with square brackets [].

RIGHT: If you ... leave out words within a [quoted] sentence, replace the missing text with a three-dot ellipsis ... [or if crossing] a sentence boundary, ...a four-dot ellipsis.”

These distinctions help the reader evaluate the trustworthiness of your quotation. Failing to follow these rules can lead to charges of plagiarism.

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

46 disconcerting vs disconcerting

Disconcerting means *causing confusion or discomfort*. *Disconcerting* is not a valid word.

WRONG: “The mistake was disconcerting.” [DNB]

RIGHT: The mistake was disconcerting.

47 disseminate v decimate

WRONG: “We have to decimate that information using these booklets.” [DNB] (Medical-clinic admin, April 2018)

We can *disseminate* something by spreading it around.

RIGHT: We have to disseminate that information....

We can *decimate* something by severely reducing the number (literally to one-tenth the original number):

RIGHT: That information will decimate objections.

48 don't address the reader

Don't address the reader (“you”) in technical writing (even though I address YOU throughout this document!).

WRONG: When encrypting your document for authentication, you use your private key.

RIGHT: When encrypting one's document for authentication, one uses one's private key.

RIGHT: When encrypting a document for authentication, a user applies the private key.

49 edged away vs hedged away

WRONG: “I hedged away from answering that question.” [DNB]

No such expression: “hedged away.”

50 eminent / immanent / imminent

Eminent means famous or of high standing or reputation.

RIGHT: She is an eminent scientist.

Immanent means that something is inherent in something.

RIGHT: Many religions describe their deity as immanent – existing everywhere in the universe.

Imminent means about to occur.

RIGHT: According to believers that we are in the End Times, the destruction of the physical universe is imminent.

51 encoding v encryption

Coding refers to substituting other symbols from a *codebook* to mean something specific; for example, spies might use

The *take-out* is in the *fridge* to mean

The *documents* are in the *safe*.

One *encodes* the original and *decodes* the coded message.

In contrast, *encryption* refers to converting *cleartext* (e.g., *The documents are in the safe*) into a scrambled sequence (*encryption*) (e.g., *8*54nVY1-05-908udz0ljkHTRG922u4N33dN*) using a *key* (e.g., *UrnV#b!m**) and a particular algorithm (e.g., Pretty Good Privacy – PGP) which can then be converted back (*decryption*) into cleartext using an appropriate key and algorithm.

52 ensure vs insure

One *ensures* that something will happen. One *insures* by buying insurance.

WRONG: He *insured* the validity of the car registration before buying it.

RIGHT: He *ensured* the validity of the car registration before buying it by checking with the state Department of Motor Vehicles.

RIGHT: He *insured* the car against accidents by buying a policy from a reliable insurance company.

53 eradicate vs irradiate

WRONG: “The best way to irradiate soil mealy bugs from your plants is soil drenching. [DNB] (from a gardening Website)

One *irradiates* something by blasting it with radiation (e.g., ultraviolet light).

One *eradicates* something by removing all of it.

RIGHT: The best way to eradicate disinformation is to provide well-founded evidence every time the lies are noticed.

54 err vs air

WRONG: During testing, it is recommended to air on the side of caution (medical record). [DNB]

Oy gevalt. * To *err* is to make a mistake.

* “*Oy gevalt*” is a Yiddish phrase meaning literally “Oh violence!” and responds to something shocking.

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

55 every day / everyday; every one / everyone

Everyday = ordinary, not special.

RIGHT: I see errors like this one; they are an *everyday* occurrence.

Every day means *daily*.

RIGHT: I see errors like this one every day.

Every one means *each*.

RIGHT: Every one of the errors is correctable.

Everyone means *all the people*.

RIGHT: *Everyone* can correct errors with enough knowledge and attention

56 every word, every phrase, every sentence, every paragraph, every section

Every word, every phrase, every sentence, every paragraph and every section of text must add operational meaning to your technical writing.

If it doesn't add, benefit, clarify, distinguish, explain, or focus your meaning, leave it out! For example,

WRONG: At this point in time, you may already be exhausted by the details in this document.

The phrase *at this point in time* makes the author look silly. What's the alternative? At this point in flavor? At this point in color? At this point in my psychedelic-drug usage?

Other examples of *useless phrases*:

... in this day and age....,

What it is is that....,

Having said that....,

That said....,

Needless to say....

This last is particularly annoying: if it is needless to say, why is the writer saying it? [Growl.]

57 factor vs feather

WRONG: "You have to feather that into the decision."
[DNB] (Discussion among medical staff)

RIGHT: You have to factor that into the decision."

58 farther vs further

Farther is used for distance; *further* is used for degree:

We traveled farther than planned because of a long detour.

We discussed the question further.

59 fewer vs less

Use *fewer* for what you can count; use *less* for what you have to measure.

WRONG: We have less students in class this semester.

RIGHT: We have fewer students in class this semester.

RIGHT: We have less enthusiasm for this teacher reported in the student surveys.

60 fine-toothed comb vs fine tooth-comb

There is no such thing as a "tooth-comb."

WRONG: "We looked through the records with a fine tooth-comb." [DNB] (Medical notes)

A tooth that has closely spaced teeth is a *fine-toothed comb*. The phrase means to use special care in a search or analysis.

RIGHT: We looked through the records with a fine-toothed comb.

61 finger's breadth vs fingerbreath

WRONG: "The setting was only a fingerbreath off." [DNB] (Medical notes)

62 first off

Don't use "First off,..." It's not standard (professional) English. Just leave out the "off:"

WRONG: First off, we recalculated the trajectory.

RIGHT: First, we recalculated the trajectory.

63 firstly, secondly...

Don't use *firstly*, *secondly*, etc. when introducing elements of a list. Just write *first*, *second* and so on.

WRONG: Firstly, we had to recalculate the trajectory. Secondly, we adjusted the mass of the fuel.

RIGHT: First, we had to recalculate the trajectory. Second, we adjusted the mass of the fuel.

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

64 frankly, honestly, really, sincerely, truthfully

Frankly, honestly, really, sincerely, truthfully – all these expressions raise legitimate doubt about the frankness, honesty, reality, sincerity and truth of everything else in the writing that is not prefaced by these adverbs. Avoid using these words in reference to yourself.

WRONG: Frankly, I can't see why you would marry him.

They can be used effectively when describing someone else, although *really* is a weak modifier.

RIGHT: She told him frankly that she would never marry him.

WRONG: She was really mad at him.

As opposed to what, exactly? She was falsely mad? She was mad in her imagination? She was mad in an alternate universe?

See also "[*in fact / to tell the truth.*](#)"

65 frustrating vs flustrating

WRONG: "It was very flustrating." [DNB] (medical patient, Feb 2017)

No such word. If one wishes to refer to being *flustered* instead of *frustrated*, the word is *flustering*.

RIGHT: The microphone's intermittent failures were flustering the speaker.

66 full justification

Don't use full justification with your word-processing software; it makes it difficult to spot extra spaces in the text and makes a mess when some lines are much shorter than others in your text. The following example forced a shorter second line to illustrate the problem:

WRONG: I convert student text to left-justified as a matter of course when editing or grading papers because I dislike seeing gaps in the justified text resulting from noticeably shorter lines.

67 fulsome

WRONG: He said he hopes national security leaders have a fulsome, open, public debate about these issues.

Although there is unfortunately a growing acceptance of this adjective as meaning *abundant*, the long-standing meaning of *fulsome* is negative – *offensively overdone* or *excessively flattering*.

RIGHT: The fulsome flattery of the Orange Narcissistic Sociopath by his cult members was disgusting.

Because of the thus a risk of ambiguity, I recommend avoiding the term.

68 gamut vs gambit

Gamut refers to a range.

RIGHT: Our plays run the gamut from comedy to tragedy.

Gambit is a play or ploy. In the example below, the word is capitalized only because it is part of a named sequence.

RIGHT: The chess player chose the classic Queen's Gambit for the opening.

69 general consensus

Consensus means *general opinion* or *general agreement*. Writing *general consensus* ("general general opinion") is redundant. This error is similar to writing *ATM machine* (automatic-teller machine machine), *PIN number* (personal-identification number number), and *VIN number* (vehicle-identification number number).

70 gerundial takes the possessive

In my experience, the following is grammatical rule little known in the USA: *the gerundial always takes the possessive*.

WRONG: *It having three legs made it very odd indeed.*

The subject is the noun version of the verb *to have* (*having*), so "it" should be possessive (its), as follows:

RIGHT: *Its having three legs made it very odd indeed.*

RIGHT: *My going to the store delayed the whole family by half an hour.*

Quick memory: In 1973, I entered a famous scientist's lab as a Research and Teaching Fellow to prepare my doctorate. One day, as I was washing an Erlenmeyer flask at the laboratory's sink, he came out of his office and asked, "Is it *me going to the store* or *my going to the store*?" Without turning around, I answered, "The gerundial takes the possessive." There was complete silence. When I turned around, I found the professor, his lab technician and two other graduate students staring at me in bewilderment.

71 glean vs gleam

WRONG: "There is serious doubt about how much accurate information can be gleamed from the patient's comments." [DNB] (nurse's note, 2011)

To glean is to *gather* grain, other food, or information.

Gleaming means *reflecting* or *emitting light*.

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

72 grammar & style checker

On my Windows system, MS-WORD highlights incorrect spellings and questionable constructions using underlining with a green wavy line. Floating the cursor over the alert shows a suggestion for improvement.

In Word, use **Word Options | Proofing | When correcting spelling and grammar in Word** options to select **Grammar & Style** as well as **spelling**.

73 grist vs grits

WRONG: “Of course that kind of mistake is just grits for the mill when his boss rakes him over the coals.” [DNB]

The cliché *grist for the mill* refers to *materials or information for use in a process*.

74 hackles vs cackles vs shackles

WRONG: “Lying really gets my cackles up!” (DNB relative, 2023).

WRONG: “I have a tendency to get my shackles up.” [DNB] (ER nurse)

Hackles are feathers on the neck of a bird or hairs on the neck and back of a dog; they rise when the animal is alarmed. The phrase “gets my hackles up” refers to serious irritation or anger.

RIGHT: The Orange Narcissistic Sociopath’s constant lying gets my hackles up.

75 hair’s breadth vs hair’s breath

WRONG: “I missed that car by a hair’s breath.” [DNB]

A hair’s breadth means *just a little*.

76 heart-rendering vs heart-rending

WRONG: “It was a heart-rendering experience.” [DNB] (NPR 2017)

Heart-rending means *causing emotional pain or grief*. The literal meaning is *ripping apart*.

77 heirloom vs hair loom

WRONG: “I love our rose plant – it’s become a real family hair loom.” [DNB] (Vermont Garden Club)

An heirloom is something passed on from one generation to another in a family.

If there were such a thing, a *hair loom* would presumably be a tool for weaving hair.

78 hunkered vs hankered

WRONG: “I got tired of waiting so I just hankered down and did it myself. [DNB] (friend)

To *hunker* means to want, desire, or yearn for something.

Hunkering means to squat or crouch; *hunkering down* means getting ready for a long wait.

79 ibid. in references

The abbreviation stands for Latin *ibidem*, which means *in the same place*.

If a second passage from the same source is quoted close to the first and there is no intervening quotation from a different source, “*ibid.*” may be used in the second parenthetical reference (e.g., “*ibid.*, 114” or “*Ibid.*, 114). If a quotation from another source has intervened, a shortened reference may be given for the earlier reference (e.g., “*Hawking, Brief History of Time*, 114”).

Based on *Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th edition, §11.74

80 if not

Don’t use “if not” as if it meant “or.” The phrase is deprecatory: it admits that what follows it is *not true*. Unfortunately, the phrase is so often misused that it can be impossible to tell what the author means. Is the author saying that what follows is true or false?

WRONG: *There are hundreds if not thousands of examples of this error.*

Which is it? *There are hundreds of examples but not thousands of examples?* Or *There are hundreds and possibly thousands of examples?*

RIGHT: *There are hundreds or thousands of examples of this error.* [There might be thousands.]

RIGHT: *There are hundreds, although not thousands, of examples of this error.* [There are not thousands.]

81 immemorial vs in memoriam

“From time *in memoriam*...” (NPR 2016) [DNB]

Immemorial means *forever*; *in memoriam* means *in memory*.

82 impact

Many careful writers strongly dislike the verb *impact* in any figurative sense whatsoever, as in *The revised budget impacts the university unfavorably* and *The revised budget impacts on the athletic program*. Though the verb in senses extending beyond the infliction of physical force is undeniably common in business, legal, journalistic, and political discourse, anyone who hopes to achieve an effect even faintly literary [or scholarly, adds MK] should avoid it in favor of *affect*, *change*. Use of the verb is uncontroversial only in physical senses: *The car impacted the railing*. By the same token, the noun *impact* should not be used

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

as a catchall alternative for words like *effect* or *impression*; rather, it should be used to convey the idea of powerful, dramatic consequence: *The sudden rise in prices had a calamitous impact on many economies.*

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83 imply / infer

To **imply** something is to *suggest* or *bring to mind* an idea without making it explicit. For example, the question *When did you stop taking bribes?* implies that the person addressed must have been taking bribes. In contrast, to **infer** something is to deduce it or to reason towards a conclusion. *I inferred that he had been taking bribes from observing him to accept many money-filled, unmarked envelopes from building contractors without recording these sums in his taxable income.* Unfortunately, a recent dictionary accepts the use of *infer* as equivalent to *imply* – an unnecessary and regrettable loss of precision in our language.³

84 in fact, to tell the truth, honestly, truthfully

Putting *in fact* or *to tell the truth* or *honestly* or *truthfully* in front of an opinion doesn't magically convert opinion into fact or convince the reader of sincerity. And in cases where the statement *is* factual, the phrases cast doubt on the veracity of everything that is not preceded by those words..

85 Incredible, unbelievable

Someone says emphatically, *The actor was incredible!* Does this exclamation mean that the actor was *good* or *bad*? Another person says of their impression of a witness, *Her testimony was unbelievable!* Was the witness convincing – or not? By watching the person speak, one may be able to guess which meaning is intended; in writing, the interpretation may be more difficult.

These words mean *not credible* or *not believable*. Because both have been so often misused in colloquial speech and writing, they are no longer unambiguous. **Don't use them in formal writing.** And *definitely* do not apply them to the performance of an actor even in colloquial speech: *"He was unbelievable in that movie"* is not a compliment.

86 indefinite antecedents

Avoid indefinite antecedents for pronominal adjectives or pronouns "this", "that", "which," or "it." Provide a specific object so that the reader does not have to guess about what you are referring. Thus

WRONG: *The countries went to war in 1914 and used poison gas. This led to serious death tolls across Europe in the next four years.*

What led to serious death, the war itself or the poison gas? Normally, the word "this" would point to the *proximate* (nearest) noun – in our example, "gas." If the author meant that the *war* caused the serious death tolls, that meaning might not come through to all the readers.

RIGHT: *The countries went to war in 1914 and used poison gas. This **conflict** led to serious death tolls across Europe in the next four years.*

87 indicative and subjunctive moods

Compare the meanings of these sentences:

(1) **RIGHT:** *It is also important that the staff understands the technical field in which they work.*

Sentence (1) illustrates the normal *indicative* mood of the verb *to understand*. The sentence means that *the fact that the staff already understands the field* is viewed as important.

(2) **RIGHT BUT DIFFERENT:** *It is also important that the staff understand the technical field in which they work.*

Sentence (2) illustrates the *subjunctive* mood of *to understand*. The sentence means that the staff *ought* to understand the field.

Use subjunctive for hypotheticals; e.g.,

RIGHT: *I wish I were there*

WRONG: *I wish I was there*

RIGHT: *If I were to hit my professor on the head he would be astonished. Alternative: Were I to hit my professor on the head he would be astonished.*

The subjunctive also has a past tense:

RIGHT: *If I had been there I could have,....*

WRONG: *If I was there I could have....*

[Subtle but useful.]

88 inherent vs adherent

"There are adherent risks to outsourcing any component of a business...." (MK student quiz response 2010-11)

Inherent means *part of the object*; *adherent* means *sticky*.

89 intensifiers weaken your text

Don't use intensifiers such as *highly*, *extremely*, *absolutely* and *very* in your professional writing. Such adjectives and adverbs *weaken* your text instead of strengthening it. They give the impression that you have to defend your position because the reader won't agree with your appraisal. Compare *This attack*

³ With thanks to Prof John MacMichael for noting this distinction in grading one of his MSIA students' essays.

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was effective and destructive with *This attack was very effective and extremely destructive.*

In particular, don't describe anything except a lie or a performance as "incredible" in technical writing. The word means "not believable," not "good."

See also entries for "[in fact, to tell the truth, honestly, truthfully](#)" and for "[mealy mouthed adverbs](#)."

90 Internet and Web vs internet and web

An *internet* is a collection of networks that are linked together; the *Internet* is the global TCP/IP-based internet that people often call *the Net* or *the Internet*. A *web* is made by spiders; the *Web* refers to the World Wide Web, a system based on HTTP for linking Web pages written in HTML. The capitalized versions are proper names, not generic descriptions. However, this distinction has fallen into disuse and may not be enforced even by grammar extremists.

91 Invoke vs evoke

"*have to evoke their 5th Amendment rights....*" (NPR reporter, Jan 2008 [DNB])

To *evoke* means to refer to something and stimulate memory; to *invoke* means to refer to something as justification.

92 ... is because.... / ... is when....

The informal usage illustrated in *A breach of authenticity is when someone generates false descriptions or false attributions of data* should not appear in formal writing. Nothing *is when*. Perhaps it *occurs when* or perhaps it *is defined as having* but it isn't *is when!*

Similar contempt pours upon the head of the unfortunate user of *...is because....* as in *The loss of credibility is because the usage sounds illiterate*. That sentence would correctly be written as *The loss of credibility occurs because the usage sounds illiterate* or *The loss of credibility is due to the usage's sounding illiterate*.

93 italicize foreign words

For example, "The French mechanic referred to the clutch as the *embrayage*." However, commonly used Latin expressions such as *ad hoc*, *ex post facto*, *ibid.*, *op.cit.*, *loc. cit.*, *e.g.*, *i.e.*, and *viz.* are not usually italicized.

94 its and it's

Alas for anyone learning English as a foreign language, the possessive of *it* is *its*, not *it's*. *It's* is the contraction of *it is*. Get over, ah, it.

WRONG: *The wine was good, but it's price was too high.*

RIGHT: *The wine was good, but its price was too high.*

WRONG: *Its a pity that English spelling is so complicated.*

RIGHT: *It's a pity that English spelling is so complicated.*

95 lackadaisical vs laxadaisical

"He displayed a laxadaisical attitude toward his errors." No such word. *Lackadaisical* means *careless*.

96 lax vs lapse

"I've been a little *lapse* in my rounds." [DNB colleague.] *Lax* means *loose*, *sloppy* or *careless*. A *lapse* is an interruption or failure to renew something: "My license has lapsed."

97 lay vs lie

One *lies* down; one *lays* an object on a table.

98 lead vs led

Lead (pronounced *lead*) is the present tense of the verb; *led* is the past tense. E.g., *I currently lead the Fourth Scout Troop; I formerly led the Third Scout Troop.*

99 literally is not an intensifier

Don't use *literally* as if it a generic intensifier. Think about the following ridiculous sentence:

WRONG: *He was literally falling apart in shock when he saw the number of errors in his draft essay.*

No, he wasn't. He was upset but he did not in fact fall into pieces.

RIGHT: *He was literally cut in two when he fell into the sawmill.*

100 loath, loth, or loathe?

Do not confuse the spelling of *loath* (or its variant *loth*) and *loathe*.

Loath (or *loth*) is an adjective meaning *unwilling* or *reluctant* and is usually followed by *to*, as in *I was loath [or loth] to admit it.*

It is also occasionally encountered in the fixed phrase *nothing loath* (or *nothing loth*).

Loathe is a verb meaning *dislike intensely*: *I loathe this kind of music.*

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101 long quotations can be indented paragraphs

If you have a long quotation, you may indent it as one or more paragraphs; you do not have to use quotation marks for such indented material – particularly useful if there are double-quotation marks ("") in the block. Those would otherwise have to be converted to single quotation marks (') in the quotation itself.

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

102 majority as a singular or plural?

- When you use majority to refer to a **group of people** or things as a unit or whole, use a singular verb: *A majority of the Senate intends to vote "Nay."*
- When you use majority to refer to people **within a group**, use a plural verb: *The majority of our students live on campus, with a minority living in the surrounding neighborhoods.*

In the second sentence, each student is under consideration; hence, the plural verb.

Ensure that any pronouns referring to *majority* are in the same number denoted by *majority*. Thus, it is incorrect to say *A majority of the Senate has cast their votes*.

Say instead *A majority of the Senate has cast its vote*, or, if you are speaking of the senators as individuals, say *A majority of the senators have cast their votes*.

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103 manual linefeeds forbidden for jumping to new page

Never use manual linefeeds (ENTER) to start a new page; use a hard page break (CTL-ENTER) so that you don't find your text slipping up the previous page or starting in the middle of a page when you reformat your text. In addition, use the **paragraph format** functions to separate paragraphs from each other automatically rather than constantly remembering to press ENTER twice.

See also "[page breaks](#)."

If you are a beginner in using MS-WORD, consult the primer "Tips for Using MS-WORD Effectively" available from http://www.mekabay.com/methodology/word_tips.pdf >.

104 many & often

Dangerous words. Avoid *many* and *often* unless you are prepared to find the evidence and refer to it. See also "[mealy mouthed adverbs](#)" below.

105 mealy mouthed adverbs

Often, quite, rather, somewhat, usually, very – these adverbs weaken your writing. Think hard before using any of them: are they necessary? Are they helpful?

WEAKER: *Usually* you will *tend* to find that such adverbs are *rather* useless and *somewhat* pointless as well as *very often* being *quite* irritating!

STRONGER: Weak adverbs are useless and pointless as well as irritating!

See also "[intensifiers](#)."

106 metric prefixes

Metric units (nanometer, kilogram) are not capitalized; however, values less than one are abbreviated using lowercase whereas values greater than 1 are abbreviated with an initial capital letter.

Thus

The enormous housecat weighed 10 kilograms (or 10 Kg) whereas its whiskers weighed only 10 milligrams (or 10 mg).

n = nano = 10^{-9}

μ = micro = 10^{-6}

m = milli = 10^{-3}

K = kilo = 10^3

M = mega = 10^6

G = giga = 10^9

T = tera = 10^{12}

P = peta = 10^{15}

E = exa = 10^{18}

Z = zetta = 10^{21}

Y = yotta = 10^{24}

There is a difference in application of these prefixes when used for measuring amounts of storage in bytes or bits. Uppercase "B" as in KB, MB etc. signifies bytes (characters); lowercase "b" indicates bits instead of bytes (8 bits per byte).

There are several relatively new prefixes defined by the US National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) in 1995 to avoid ambiguity between the standard metric terms and the newer binary-related terms.

These prefixes are as follows:

K = kibi = $2^{10} = 1,024 \cong 10^3$

M = mebi = $2^{20} = 1,048,576 \cong 10^6$

G = gibi = $2^{30} = 1,073,741,824 \cong 10^9$

T = tebi = $2^{40} = 1,099,511,627,776 \cong 10^{12}$

P = pebi = $2^{50} \cong 1.126 \times 10^{15}$

E = exbi = $2^{60} \cong 1.153 \times 10^{18}$

Z = zebi = $2^{70} \cong 1.181 \times 10^{21}$

Y = yobi = $2^{80} \cong 1.209 \times 10^{24}$

A convenient trick for converting from powers of 2 to powers of 10 is as follows:

$2^n \cong 10^{0.30103n}$ (e.g., $2^{10} \cong 10^{3.01013} \cong 10^3$)

Correspondingly,

$10^m \cong 2^{m/0.30103}$ (e.g., $10^6 \cong 2^{6/0.30103} \cong 2^{19.9} \cong 2^{20}$)

107 moot vs mute

"Whether it was a bug or an attack is a mute point." [Student essay.]

"Moot" means *unresolved, undecided, or unsettled*. "Mute" means *quieted or silenced*.

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

108 Mrs

Don't use "Mrs" unless you know that the person you are addressing prefers that old-style, sexist honorific. Many younger women resent the notion that they will lose their own surname when they marry; in some countries, women must go to court to change their name legally to adopt the surname of their partner (usually husbands). In professional circles, many women prefer the generic "Ms" even if they use "Mrs" in private life.

109 most anyone

Most anyone is a colloquialism inappropriate for formal writing. Use *Almost anyone* or *Almost everyone* depending on your specific meaning.

110 my vs I's

"During the candidate's and I's conversation...." [DNB] (NPR interview)

There is no such word as "I's." "During the candidate's and my conversation...."

111 none is or none are?

This correction is very much a matter of taste. Technically, *none* (a contraction of *not one*) is singular. *I checked all the bottles; none is empty.*

However, many good writers now use the word in the plural: *I checked all the bottles; none are empty.*

At this point in the evolution of our language, it's a matter of personal preference which one you use; just keep your usage internally consistent within your document.

112 nowadays

Colloquial: don't use it in professional writing. Use *now* or *today* or *currently* if you have to qualify your sentence. Note that *Today, the consensus of experts is that....* is perfectly well written as *The consensus of experts is that....* And never write, *In this day and age....*

113 number of the verb must accord with number of the subject

WRONG: *The color and shape of the object is important.*

RIGHT: *The color and shape of the object are important.*

A frequent source of confusion is a singular **subject** that is modified with a **plural in a prepositional phrase**; e.g.,

WRONG: *The cause of the numerous errors were traced to poor training.*

Should use *was* because the subject of the verb is *cause* and not *errors*. The proximate (near) noun *errors* tricks the writer into

making the verb accord with that word instead of with the subject.

RIGHT: *The cause of the numerous errors was traced to poor training.*

Another issue is illustrated in this sequence:

WRONG: *The attacker can do [such and such]. Furthermore, they can do [whatever].*

If *they* refers to *attacker* then either (a) use *attackers* in the first sentence or (b) use *the attacker* in the second sentence or (c) use *he* as the subject of the second sentence.

Some authors alternate the use of *he* and *she* throughout the text for variety and to avoid gender bias. You can also use the clumsy *he* or *she* (but not generally *he/she*).

114 number: singular or plural?

Number is a collective noun that can take a singular or plural verb depending on how you use it. If you put the definite article *the* in front of *number*, you are stipulating one particular number, even if *of* and a series of things comes next. Therefore, you must use a singular verb with *number* preceded by *the*: *The number of lab coats available is limited.* On the other hand, if you put the indefinite article *a* before *number*, you must use a plural verb: *A number of lab coats are available.*

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115 numbers spelled out

Spell out whole numbers from zero to ten and use numerals for 11 and up. However, fractions can be put in numerical form if you wish. One can write "one half" and "two thirds," but "seven tenths" seems bizarre – much better as 1/2, 2/3, or 7/10 or 0.7.

116 off of

"Off of" is not standard (professional) English. Simply use "off" where necessary or "from" on "on" where appropriate.

WRONG: *I got the quotation off of a Website.*

RIGHT: *I got the quotation from a Website.*

117 oftentimes vs often times

Don't use *oftentimes* at all. Just write *often*.

118 only modifies the next word

WRONG: *I only need one tomato.*

RIGHT: *I need only one tomato.*

RIGHT: *I only threw one tomato, but Bob smashed his with a sledgehammer.*

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

Note that in the last example, a poor writer (or someone speaking colloquially) might believe that *I only threw one* and *I threw only one* mean the same – but they don't, as you can see from the second part of that example.

119 orphans

The first line of a paragraph may appear all by itself at the bottom of a page. That line is known by editors and typesetters as an *orphan*. In Word, you can prevent orphans automatically by highlighting text (usually all of your text) and using the **Paragraph | Line and Page Breaks** settings: check **Widow/Orphan control**. See also "[widow](#)."

120 out there

Beginners sometimes include the useless, colloquial phrase *out there* in their writing; e.g., *There are many options out there for students*. **STOP THAT.**

121 page breaks -- CTL-ENTER, not repeated ENTER strokes

NEVER use multiple ENTER strokes to position material at the top of the next page -- any change in formatting or content will move the text away from the top. Instead, use the PAGE BREAK feature (Page Layout | Breaks) or simply press CTRL-ENTER.

122 page breaks managed automatically

Sometimes you need to force an entire block of text to stay together on one page. If all of that block doesn't fit at the bottom of the current page, it should move to the next page. Instead of using a manual page break (in Word, CTL-ENTER) in the middle of your text, you can highlight the section of text in one paragraph that has to stay together and, in Word, use the **Paragraph | Line and Page Breaks** function to check **Keep lines together**. If you have headings or multiple paragraphs in the block, also check **Keep with next**. You can also force page breaks before certain types of headings automatically by checking **Page break before**.

See also "[manual linefeeds](#)" and "[page formatting](#)."

123 page formatting

Never use manual page formatting; always allow or force your word processor to create page breaks, page headers, and page footers. Manual formatting (e.g., writing out a page footer at the bottom of each page) immediately becomes incorrect if anyone changes the page margins, the typeface, point sizes, or leading (inter-line and inter-character spacing) of your text. Such manual formatting then becomes stranded in odd places in the resulting text. In particular, avoid forcing a manual page break in the middle of your text; insertions, deletions and other changes can push the page break into a place where it causes an unexpected new page.

See also "[manual linefeeds](#)" and "[page breaks managed automatically](#)".

124 painstakingly vs painstakingly

"*They painstakingly searched the entire area.*" [DNB]. VPR announcer, August 2016. The word is "*painstakingly*."

125 paragraph break

What's a good place for a paragraph break? When you *change the focus* of your writing to a significantly new topic, *break your paragraph* to help the reader implicitly grasp the change.

126 paragraph spacing

I usually remove all double-carriage-returns (in Word, CTL-H followed by entering $\wedge p \wedge p$ in the *Find what* field and $\wedge p$ in the *Replace with* field) and also switch students' **Line spacing** to *Single* and **Spacing Before** to 6 pt before and **After** to 6 pt after every paragraph. Automatic formatting options allow you to skip having to insert an extra space after each paragraph and therefore help you maintain a consistent style throughout your document. Double spacing is a waste of screen-space when submitting a document electronically and is a holdover from the days of typed manuscripts, when the space between lines was used for editorial comments and corrections. Today, editors use comments that their word processors put on the side of each page.

127 parallel construction

Think about the meaning of components that follow conjunctions such as *and* or *or*. The normal pattern is that these conjunctions apply to the proximate (nearest preceding) verb. For example, the sentence,

WRONG: *Medical information can be hacked by civilians using computers to obtain patient records or change different medications.*

This construction results in momentary confusion as the reader tries to parse "...to obtain records or change..." by interpreting *change* as a noun in parallelism with *records*.

RIGHT: *To ensure seamless communication, write, "...to obtain patient records or to change..." Thus, "Medical information can be hacked by civilians using computers to obtain patient records or to change different medications."*

Another example of a non-parallel construction is *Medical information can be hacked by civilians or professionals can access the data directly*. In this case, the first impression is that medical information can be hacked by civilians or by professionals – not the intended meaning. The sentence could be correctly written as *Medical information can be hacked by civilians; professionals can access the data directly*.

Lack of parallel construction often shows up in lists; for example,

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

WRONG: *The key factors in preventing data leakage are as follows:*

- *Encrypt all sensitive data*
- *Assigning access privileges with care*

....

This list should use the same verb form in all entries; thus either *encrypt* and *assign* or *encrypting* and *assigning* or *encryption of* and *assignment of*. Similar parallelism should apply to lists that include *they* in some items but *he* or *she* or *one* in others.

128 phased out

“Microsoft’s Windows 10 will be *faced out* beginning....”
Nope. [DNB]

129 piqued vs peaked

“It was a biologically based medication and that *peaked* her interest.” [DNB] (medical note).

Piqued means *drew the attention* or *focus*. *Peaked* means *reached a maximum*.

130 plethora

pleth·o·ra [pléthərə]

noun

1. large or excessive amount or number: a very large amount of something or number of things, especially an excessive amount (formal); e.g., *a plethora of new scholarly articles on the subject*
2. excess of blood: an excess of blood in a part of the body, especially in the facial veins, causing a ruddy complexion
[Mid-16th century. Via late Latin < Greek plēthorē < plēthein “be full”]

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Therefore, do not write “*a plethora of*” when you mean “*lots of*.” A plethora generally refers to BAD STUFF or to TOO MUCH STUFF, not just lots of stuff. It’s also now a pretentious noun that normal writers should avoid.

RIGHT: *My students display a plethora of grammatical and stylistic errors due to the stupid natural-language training that contaminated the teaching of English from the 1970s onward.*

WRONG: *My students display a plethora of talents for original thinking.*

131 portal vs porthole

“They have created a new porthole for the medical staff.”
[DNB] (hospital announcement).

A *porthole* is a window on a ship. A website can be a *portal*, which refers to a doorway.

132 premier / premiere

Premier (adjective) is *the best* or *most important* or (noun) *a prime minister*; **premiere** (noun) is *a first public performance* and, unfortunately, also an adjective meaning – wait for it – *the best or most important*. Sigh.

Thus:

RIGHT: *The Premier of Saskatchewan, along with three other provincial premiers, attended the premiere of Swan Lake on Tuesday, starring the premiere ballerina of the Saskatchewan Provincial Ballet corps – a premier example of near-homophonic word usage.*

133 punctuation marks inside quotation in US

Punctuation marks go inside quotations in US usage but outside in UK usage. Thus

WRONG FOR US TEXT: “*He went inside the house*”.

RIGHT FOR US TEXT: “*He went inside the house.*”

You can set your preference for the spell checker to catch and correct these errors in Word using the sequence **Office Button | Word Options | Proofing | Writing Style – Settings | Require – Punctuation required with quotes – inside**.

134 purposely or purposefully?

These two adverbs are sometimes confused. Although both imply that somebody has a specific purpose in mind, they are used in different contexts and are not interchangeable.

Purposely means “deliberately or with an express purpose in mind”: *I purposely left the door unlocked.*

Purposefully means “in a determined way” or “with a definite goal”: *She strode purposefully across the yard.*

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135 quotation marks are not for emphasis

Don’t use quotation marks as a form of emphasis – they’re for quoted materials. I don’t see how *this* text is a quotation. I just wrote, “I don’t see how *this* text is a quotation.” BTW, my favorite example of this kind of error is from a highway restaurant whose sign read *Good “Food”*. Another one of this type was “*Good*” *Food*.

You *can* use italics if there is some reason to emphasize a *specific* word or phrase; e.g., when introducing a technical term.

136 quotation marks are not for slang

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

Do not put colloquial expressions or slang in quotation marks in a misguided attempt to distance yourself from using such language.

WRONG: *He is a real “jerk.”*

RIGHT: *He is a real jerk.*

“RIGHT” here assumes that using the word “jerk” is OK in a specific context. But make up your mind: if it’s OK to use the expression, don’t put quotation marks around it. If it’s not OK, don’t use the word at all.

137 quotations: standards

You may NOT alter the text of a quotation without using the scholarly standards for indicating such changes:

You must use [] for inserted or changed words.

You must use ellipses (... for piece missing from middle of a sentence and for missing piece spanning more than one sentence).

You must put [sic] (which means *thus* in Latin) following a misspelling in the original quotation.

See also “[elisions and interpolations](#).”

138 reading aloud

Try reading your draft aloud to help locate errors that are not marked by your word processor. If permitted, you can even have a buddy read your draft to see mistakes that are invisible to you because you know what you mean and may skip over minor details such as misspellings that result in real words that are not highlighted automatically by spell-check.

You may also be able to spot punctuation errors such as missing commas because the sentence will sound wrong without the corresponding pause.

139 real

“Real” is a tricky word because it is, ironically, highly subjective. Sometimes you can be more specific; e.g., you can use “effective,” “operational,” “efficient,” “documented,” “formal,” or “official” to show what you mean. Another problem is called *redefinition* in logic. For example, someone may write “There are no real doctors in New York City” – only to admit that to be a real doctor by their definition, someone must be able to cure all known diseases by the laying on of hands. That error is known as *begging the question by high redefinition*. Similarly, claiming that there are a million doctors in New York City may reveal that the speaker defines a doctor as anyone who can administer a pill. That error is *begging the question by low redefinition*. But anyway, avoid “real.” Really!

140 real figure and table numbers

Use real (word-processor-defined) figure and table numbers, not manual numbers. If you change the order of your figures

or tables, your manual numbers may have to be repaired one by one, whereas word-processor labels readjust themselves automatically.

141 real footnotes or endnotes, not manually entered superscripts or brackets

If you don’t use automatically numbered notes, adding one in the middle will force you to renumber all the references following – by hand! Using automated endnotes creates an automatic list at the end of the document so you don’t have to do it by hand. You can also get a complete list of footnotes by converting them to endnotes, copying that list, then reversing the conversion. Paste your copy into the document as text only to get your workable, editable list. If you have Word 2007, enter your references into the *Manage Sources* tool under *References*, which allows you to create footnotes or endnotes and also to create a bibliography automatically in various standard formats. And use INSERT CROSS-INDEX if you have to refer to the same source, not a new footnote with *ibid* or *op. cit.*

142 real headings

Use your word-processor’s headings feature to create headings, not manually formatted headings. The automatic heading style can be modified to suit your preferences – and all the headings of that level can then instantly change to meet your requirements (saves a lot of time and avoids inconsistencies of formatting). In Word, real headings also let you create a table of contents instantly (in a variety of styles) as well as showing up in the document map, a nifty feature that sits to the left of your screen and lets you not only see the structure of your work but also click on any heading to move to it.

143 references

Here are some notes on how to provide detailed information about every document you reference.

Word 2007, 2010 and 2013 offer excellent bibliographic functions in the Citations & Bibliography section of the toolbar. Use *Manage Sources* to create your list of sources. You can then format your references according to a ten different styles including APA, Chicago, and MLA.

One popular method is to use a footnote for the first occurrence of the reference. The note includes author (date) Title (*italicized* for a book,” enquoted” for a chapter or an article) and page. E.g., Whosit (2003). “Whosit mean?” p. 34.

You can use endnotes of the same style if you like instead of footnotes.

If you have a quotation or a pointer to the same place in the same article you have just cited in the previous reference, you can avoid another footnote by making it clear in the text that you are using the same reference; e.g., “Whosit (2003) continues with. . . .” If necessary, insert a cross-reference.

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

A riskier alternative is to use a note with “*Ibid.*” which stands for “*Ibidem*” or “in the same place.” However, if you change your text to introduce a different reference, the “*Ibid.*” will be wrong. Use cross-references (*insert cross-reference*) using your word processing capabilities instead of *Ibid.*

If the immediately following reference is to the same work but to a different place, you can note “*Op. cit.* p. 433” – (“*Opus citatum*,” – the work cited). Again, you run the risk of making this reference wrong if you insert another reference in between the first and second reference to the work in question. I do **not** recommend this method – use cross-references.

All of these methods require a *Bibliography* or *List of Works Cited* (or *Referenced*) at the end of the paper. Typically, you will alphabetize by author and by date within author if necessary. Use lowercase letters for multiple works in a year: thus

Whatsit (2007a)...

Whatsit (2007b)...

Whosit (1997)...

If you are writing for scientific or professional journals, you may want to look at EndNote and ProCite software, which provide up-to-date citation formats for hundreds of established publications.

144 regime vs regiment

“The nutritionist recommended a new dietary *regiment*.” [DNB] (medical note)

A *regimen* is a pattern; a *regiment* is a military unit.

145 repeated errors

When you find yourself making repeated typing errors, use the FIND/REPLACE function to locate all the bad spellings at once, even if they are not recognized by the spell-checker, and change them one by one using the confirmation dialog. Don’t change them all automatically – you might discover a place where the different spelling happens to be correct. The other tool you can use when you *know* that you consistently misspell a word is to add it to the automatic correction list of your word processor. In Word, that feature is known as the *AutoCorrect* function.

146 reprieve vs reprise

“On this date in 1928, Vermonters received a welcome *reprise* from bad weather.” [DNB] (*Eye on the Sky* on VPR, 2015)

A *reprise* is a repetition. “The band offered a reprise of their most popular works.”

A *reprieve* is a pardon or an escape. “The judge granted a reprieve after the victims testified in support of the accused.”

147 restrictive and non-restrictive clauses

A restrictive clause (a clause that defines which type of object it is modifying) does not take commas; a non-restrictive clause (a clause that adds supplementary information) does take commas.

Consider the meaning of *The dog which was brown bit me*. The **restrictive** clause (*which was brown* written without commas) cannot be removed without altering the meaning – specifically, that of all the possible dogs the writer could be pointing to, it was specifically the brown one which bit the writer. There is presumably only one brown dog in the group of potential biters.

In contrast, *The dog, which was brown, bit me* uses a **non-restrictive** clause (note the commas) and simply adds information that could be removed without losing the main meaning of the sentence. In other words, the main point of the sentence is that the dog bit the writer. Other dogs, may also have bitten the writer and the fact that this particular dog was brown is incidental to the purpose of the sentence. It is even possible that there were several brown dogs that might have bitten the writer.

148 reverie vs revelry

“I was very depressed, but when my car tire blew out it shook my out of my *revelry*.” [DNB]

Revelry is joyful celebration. *Reverie* is a trance-like state.

149 right of way vs right away

“The law gives the pedestrians the right away at intersections.” [DNB]

Right away means immediately; *right of way* refers to privilege of using a path or crossing.

150 run-on sentence

“A semicolon is used to mark a more important break in sentence flow than that marked by a comma. Use a semicolon between the two parts of a compound sentence (two independent clauses) when they are not connected by a conjunction: The controversial portrait was removed from the entrance hall; in its place was hung a realistic landscape.”

¶5.61 (p. 5.64) from *A Manual of Style*, Twelfth Edition, Revised (1969).

Additional comments from MK: Don’t use a comma to join independent sentences. For example, you would not write, *This is a run-on sentence, don’t use a comma to join independent sentences*. You can separate independent clauses by a period, a semicolon or a colon. You can also use conjunctions such as *and, or, but, however, and nevertheless* to link independent clauses. Note that *however* and *nevertheless* normally take a semicolon or a period; e.g., *I went to the store; however, I forgot my wallet. Nevertheless, the clerk gave me the food on account.*

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

151 said

Don't use "said" as an adjective -- it is pretentious. Unskilled writers seem to assume that because the word is sometimes used in legal documents, it must be impressive. It's not.

WRONG: "The attackers then penetrated said company...."

RIGHT: "The attackers then penetrated that company...."

152 sedentary vs sedimentary

"After surgery she became a little more *sedimentary*." [DNB] (Patient's caregiver, 2019.)

Sedentary means tending to sit. *Sedimentary* usually refers to what falls from above -- "Shale is a sedimentary rock."

153 seems as if / like/ that

It seems as if you would prefer coffee today.

It seems like coffee.

It seems that you prefer coffee today.

154 sentence fragment

Every sentence must have at least a subject and a verb. For example, the second entry in this pair is a fragment:

WRONG: *This habit would have cost him \$1,470 per account he owned. A substantial fee simply to play a computer game.*

The error could be corrected by using a subject and a noun:

RIGHT: *This habit would have cost him \$1,470 per account he owned. That **level** of expense **is** a substantial fee simply to play a computer game.*

Another solution would be to combine the two components using a dash or a colon, as in the following versions:

RIGHT: *This habit would have cost him \$1,470 per account he owned—a substantial fee simply to play a computer game.*

RIGHT: *This habit would have cost him \$1,470 per account he owned: a substantial fee simply to play a computer game.*

155 short, simple words vs long, fancy words

I always wince when I see *utilize*. What's wrong with *use*? It's shorter and it means the same!

Aim for simple, clear language. Many editors criticize other fancy words such as *assist* instead of *help*, *effectuate* instead of *make*, *efficacious* instead of *effective* and *objective* instead of *goal*.

Long words used only for effect don't impress anyone except pompous fools.⁴

156 sign in vs sign-in

Verb: sign in (*He will sign in this evening.*)

Noun: sign-in (*His sign-in was at 19:30.*)

Adjective: sign-in (*The sign-in log is on the desk.*)

157 sigh vs sign

"I'm breathing a *sign* of relief." [DNB] (relative, 2024)

A *sigh* is a quiet expulsion of breath. A *sign* is an indicator.

158 single line breaks for paragraphs

Many beginners use double line breaks to separate paragraphs. Unless there is specific reason for so doing (e.g., preparing text for HTML formatting), you can simplify your task by setting the style to put extra space at the top and bottom of every paragraph (usually 6pt above and below) and then using only one line break for each paragraph. That process avoids the occasional glitch where one forgets to hit ENTER twice; it's a simpler approach to paragraph formatting that has become popular with writers and standard in many publishing houses. You can also define whether to indent the first line of your paragraph automatically or not instead of hitting the TAB key every time (and occasionally forgetting to do so).

159 splitting infinitives

Some teachers and editors detest the split infinitive:

THEY HATE: *I want to better understand the problem split infinitives.*

THEY PREFER: *I want better to understand the problem of split infinitives. OR I want to understand the problem of split infinitives better.*

However, modern consensus is that if the split makes the sentence easier to understand, go ahead and split.

REASONABLE: *The alien ate the victim's head first to fully absorb her thought patterns before they broke down. Also The alien ate the victim's head first to absorb her thought patterns fully before they broke down.*

SILLY: *The alien ate the victim's head first fully to absorb her thought patterns before they broke down.*

160 so-called "cliché"

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

If you are going to use a cliché, use it without embarrassment or don't use it at all. Don't use quotation marks around it and don't use *so-called* unless you mean precisely that: that some people refer to the object of your phrase in a particular way.

WRONG: *He seemed "mad as a batter."*

RIGHT BUT UNIMAGINATIVE AND BORING: *He seemed mad as a batter.*

WRONG: *That solution was his so-called "ace in the hole."*

RIGHT BUT etc.: *That solution was his ace in the hole.*

Be wary of combining clichés: you can cause much unwanted amusement by mixing metaphors; e.g., "*We ran it up the flagpole and it sprouted wings, so we kicked it around some more and then plunged in with both feet.*"

161 sought-after vs thought-after

"The burgundy iceberg rose is a new and very *thought-after* variety." [DNB] (online gardening group)

162 spurt vs spur

"A few weeks after the procedure, I noticed a real growth *spur* in all my plants." [DNB] (online gardening group)

A *spurt* refers to a sudden increase. A *spur* is a blade on a boot (e.g., riding boots) or an abnormal growth on a bone.

163 state (verb) & conjunctions

When the verb *to state* means the equivalent of to say (e.g., to articulate, to announce, to explain), it is properly followed by a conjunction such as *that* or *why*.

WRONG: *He stated the heater had turned off at 19:00.*

RIGHT: *He stated that the heater had turned off at 19:00.*

RIGHT: *He stated why the heater had turned off at 19:00: the boiler exploded.*

However, if *state* is followed by an *object* of the verb, there is no conjunction:

RIGHT: *He stated the rules clearly.*

[The conjunction *that* avoids a momentary ambiguity in the reader's mind about whether the noun following *state* is an object or the subject of a verb to follow.]

164 substantive assertions

Provide references to scholarly or professional publications that supply evidence to support your statement of fact (a *substantive assertion*). For example, "Most people do such-and-such." Claiming that "most" people do so is a substantive assertion – the claim that more than 50% of all the people in the population in question do such-and-such. It is a *statement of fact* and must be justified by reference to research.

165 subjunctive vs conditional

The conditional *would* implies that you are focusing on a contingency:

RIGHT: "*I would go if I had a ride.*"

Had in this sentence is subjunctive – it refers to something that is not true (or not true yet) – a *hypothetical*.

The subjunctive *were* implies a hypothetical:

RIGHT: "*If I were to go, I am sure I would have a good time.*"

Were is subjunctive; *would* in this sentence is conditional.

A typical error is to write

WRONG: "*If I would have gone...*" which should be

RIGHT: "*Had I gone*" or

RIGHT: "*If I had gone...*"

166 such as vs like

Don't use *like* to introduce a list of specific examples. Thus

WRONG: *Respected members of society like doctors, priests and teachers....*

RIGHT: *Respected members of society such as doctors, priests and teachers....*

The word *like* in this context implies similarity; it can also be momentarily misinterpreted as a verb.

167 symbol or numeral does not start a sentence

Don't start a sentence with a symbol (e.g., §, °, %) or a numeral (½, 2, 3rd) or a year (2003); spell out the word instead. The *Chicago Manual of Style* suggests that if the result seems clumsy, you can use a different construction for your sentence to avoid the problem. Thus *Two thousand seven was a bad year for penguins* could be rewritten as *The year 2007 was bad for penguins*.

168 than v then

Use "than" as the start of a phrase or clause comparing or contrasting to the previous information. Use "then" to start a clause indicating that something has happened later.

WRONG: I opened the letter, had a cup of coffee, and than I read the message.

RIGHT: I opened the letter, had a cup of coffee, and then I read the message.

WRONG: The package was bigger then the mailbox.

RIGHT: The package was bigger than the mailbox.

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

169 table of contents

To generate a complete table of contents (ToC), use word-processor-defined real headings for all of your headings. Once you have headings at level 1 (and any other levels you wish) you can use the **Insert Table of Contents** function to create a formatted, automatically updatable ToC. In MS-WORD, to delete a single line within the ToC, place your cursor at the end of the line, use BACKSPACE to highlight only that line, and press DELETE. You can right-click anywhere in the ToC to update page numbers or recreate the entire table.

170 tack vs tact

“He took the *tact* of being charming...” [DNB]

Tact refers to thoughtful adjustment of language or behavior to avoid offense. *Tack* can refer to the direction of a vehicle or of a conversation.

171 taper vs tamper

“That was the medicine I kept trying to tamper off...” [DNB] (patient, 2019)

To *taper off* means to reduce gradually. “Tamper” means to interfere.

172 tenet vs tenant

“A major tenant of these theory is...” [DNB]

A *tenet* is a fundamental belief or principle. A *tenant* is someone who rents a dwelling.

173 tenterhooks vs tenderhooks

“Everybody is on tenderhooks.” [DNB] (NPR reporter in Iraq, 2008)

On *tenterhooks* refers to being in suspense or unease.

174 their / there / they're

I'm sure it's enough to list these homophones for you to get the point. *Their intelligence was clear; there was a good example in their use of plain English. They're going to go far!*

175 tic douloureux vs tic de la rue

“The patient exhibited a *tick de la rue* in his upper left thigh.” [DNB] (medical notes)

A *tic douloureux* refers to a painful twitch.

176 topical headings

Break your text up by inserting descriptive headings. You may use one or more levels of heading. Be sure to use the Styles feature of your word processor so that you can identify and reformat all level x headings in a single operation. Don't manually format each instance of a heading – you risk forgetting some and ending up with inconsistent formatting. In addition, repeated manual formatting is a waste of your time.

177 transitive verbs require conjunction for a dependent clause.

A transitive verb (e.g., *ensure*) takes an object; the noun that follows it is usually assumed to be the object. Thus

RIGHT: *The lock ensures security of the jewels.*

RIGHT: *The doctor ensures the health of the patient.*

However, if one writes a *dependent clause* following a transitive verb, one normally has to start with a conjunction such as *that*.

These measures demonstrate that all information is safe.

The doctor ascertained why his patients were successfully avoiding fried foods: his prescription made them throw up when they ate fatty materials.

The conjunction (e.g., *that*, *why*) ensures that the reader doesn't get confused for a moment about the object of the transitive verb preceding it.

178 try and/to...

Do not write *try and* do something; *try* must be followed by an infinitive starting with *to* unless you are referring to judicial processes.

WRONG: *I will try and avoid clumsy phrases.*

RIGHT: *I will try to avoid clumsy phrases.*

But note:

RIGHT: *The prosecutor will try to convict the defendant of the felony.*

RIGHT: *The prosecutor tried and convicted the defendant of a felony.*

179 underlining

Underlining is an archaic holdover from the days, decades ago now, when typewriters could not print italics. Underlining was a signal to typesetters that the underlined words were to be set in italic. Today, we just put them in *italic* ourselves.

Another reason to avoid underlining for emphasis is that hyperlinks are conventionally shown as underlined, causing potential confusion to the reader who tries to click anything underlined in the hope of getting additional information.

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

180 unique

WRONG: *This idea was very unique.*

RIGHT: *This idea was unique.*

RIGHT: *This idea was nearly unique.*

Unique means unlike everything else. It is not a general term of approval. The word is an absolute: something is either unique or it isn't. Do not add intensifiers to this word.

181 useless introductory padding

Don't start your paragraphs with useless introductions such as "First and foremost" or "What is...?" or "There are many important aspects of this subject" or "You may wonder why..." Just get to the point directly.

182 useless words

Of course, naturally, obviously – these words are often thrown in at the start of a sentence without concern for their precise meaning in that particular sentence? Ask yourself how the proposed sentence would lose meaning by leaving out these trash words? Compare:

WRONG: *Obviously, the problem requires additional thought.*

RIGHT: *The problem requires additional thought.*

WRONG: *Of course, I dislike C++.*

RIGHT: *I dislike C++*

WRONG: *Naturally, I chose tensor calculus as my next course.*

RIGHT: *I chose tensor calculus as my next course.*

But note that these adverbial expressions or words may be perfectly legitimate in a description of a person or of a situation:

RIGHT: *He spoke naturally and fluently about his experiences during the war.*

RIGHT: *The inclusion of preparations for handicapped access were a matter of course by that time.*

RIGHT: *She was obviously embarrassed by her husband's drunken behavior.*

183 upshot vs outshoot

"I don't know the outshoot of that." [DNB] (patient, 2020)

Upshot refers to result.

184 utter vs udder

"That was an udder failure." (MK student)

Utter means *entire, complete* or *whole*. *Udder* refers to a breast (usually a cow's).

185 violating word-count limits

Be careful about word counts. Suppose the limits on an essay are 900 to 1100 (not counting cover page, standard introduction about yourself (if any), table of contents, footnotes or endnotes, and bibliography) and your editor or instructor penalizes undercounts and overcounts. Then there should not be one word below 900 and not one word above 1100.

[Yeah, yeah yeah – I know – "rigid and dogmatic obsessive-compulsive nerd imposing his neurosis on everyone else" – but following details of instructions – such as those from a CEO – can make a tremendous difference in how your professionalism is rated. Think of it as an exercise or a game.]

186 was a former

Former means *in the past – not now*. Don't put "former" in front of a past description.

WRONG: He was a former Olympic athlete and is now a research scientist.

RIGHT: He is a former Olympic athlete and is now a research scientist.

RIGHT: He was an Olympic athlete but now he's dead.

187 wheelbarrow vs wheel barrel

"I loaded my *wheel barrel* with compost from the neighbor's pile." [DNB]

A *wheelbarrow* is a single-wheeled cart.

188 who vs that

Use the pronoun *who*, not *that*, when referring to people.

WRONG: *I preferred to see the doctor that cured my father.*

RIGHT: *I preferred to see the doctor who cured my father.*

RIGHT: *It was the doctor's help that cured by father.*

189 whom vs who

When you need to use *who* as the **object** of a verb, use *whom*, which is the *objective case* for *who*.

Thus

RIGHT: *Who gave you the ball?*

and

RIGHT: *To whom did you give the ball? But*

WRONG: *Who was it for? [→ Whom was it for?]*

The distinction is particularly important when you start the sentence with *Who* or *Whom* (as may occur if you finish a question with a preposition – some older editors still frown on that practice), as in *Whom did you give the ball to?* The

Frequently Corrected Errors in English

objective case of the pronoun avoids any ambiguity, even for a moment, about whether the pronoun is the subject of the verb that follows it (*Who did...*).

190 whoever v whomever

Use *whoever* when that's the subject of a verb; use *whomever* when it's the object of a verb or of a preposition.

In the next examples, the object of *wanted* is the entire clause that follows. *Whoever* is the subject of *stole*.

WRONG: *I wanted to find whomever stole that money.*

RIGHT: *I wanted to find whoever stole that money.*

Here's another example:

WRONG: *Give the ball to whomever asks for it.*

RIGHT: *Give the ball to whoever asks for it.*

The entire clause (*whoever asks for it*), not the pronoun alone, is the object of the preposition *to*. *Whoever* is the subject of the verb and therefore in the *nominative* case.

WRONG: *You can give it to whomever you want.*

RIGHT: *You can give it to whomever you want.*

That example could be rewritten "...to whatever person you want to give it." *Whomever* is the object of the implied preposition "to."

Note: *whoever* is in the *nominative* case; *whomever* is in the *objective* case.

[This distinction has almost disappeared from modern speech and writing, so some editors are now ignoring the use of *who* for all applications. Use the search string < who whom distinction disappearing > in a search engine such as GOOGLE for many articles about this change in usage.]

191 widow

The last line of a paragraph may appear all by itself at the top of a page. That line is known by editors and typesetters as a

widow. In Word, you can prevent widows automatically by highlighting text (usually all of your text) and using the **Paragraph | Line and Page Breaks** settings: check **Widow/Orphan control**. See also "[orphans](#)."

192 Wikipedia as primary reference

I support the sponsors of Wikipedia (Wikimedia) every year with a donation. However, we should not use *Wikipedia* as a *primary* reference. You can use it as a source for further research, but it is not trustworthy as a primary source for scholarly publications *because the content is unstable*. You might point readers to an article that has been vandalized by nine-year-olds or by political propagandists such as the people who tried to change the entry on Paul Revere to make it seem as if Sarah Palin's description (of how he rode around warning the *British* that the *Americans* were coming) were correct. See the following article:

Moran, M. E. "The Top 10 Reasons Students Cannot Cite or Rely On Wikipedia." *Finding Dulcinea* (2011-10-27). < <http://www.findingdulcinea.com/news/education/2010/march/The-Top-10-Reasons-Students-Cannot-Cite-or-Rely-on-Wikipedia.html> > or < <http://tinyurl.com/ybnn6ah> >

193 yoke vs yolk

"Come to me all who labor; my yolk is light." (*Facebook* 2024)

A *yoke* is a brace usually placed on shoulders to help pull something. The *yolk* is part of an egg.

