

35

mistakes to
avoid in your
writing: A cheat
sheet for common
English grammar
mistakes.

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INTRODUCTION

There are literally hundreds of different rules for grammar, style, and usage, and no one can possibly keep track of them all. That's why I wrote this book.

I wrote this book for writers who want to write effectively and compellingly but don't want to spend a lot of time sifting through grammar textbooks or style guides to get it right. I provide examples of common usage and grammatical problems along with solutions and explanations.

I have kept many of the explanations short and concise so that this e-book can be used as a cheat sheet on your desk or in your office. If you desire a more full explanation for any of the problems presented below, please visit WritingExplained.org.

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USAGE MISTAKES

The vast majority of linguistic problems that writers, copyeditors, and teachers struggle with don't really concern grammar at all—they concern usage. Usage is the collective habits of a language's native speakers, and sometimes these habits can cause quite a bit of frustration for editors and writers with an eye for precision in writing.

In language, many words are so similar in sound that they are confused with each other—even to native speakers. In this section we have summarized 20 of the most commonly confused word sets.

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1. Affect vs. Effect

Incorrect: The game will effect our standings in the league.

Correct: The game will affect our standings in the league.

Although both words can be used as nouns and verbs, “effect” is usually used as a noun and “affect” is usually used as a verb.

2. Apart vs. A part

Incorrect: Can I be apart of your group?

Correct: Can I be a part of your group?

Apart is an adverb meaning, “separated by some distance.” *These two rocks are three feet apart from each other.* “A part” is two separate words, the article “a” and the noun “part.” *Apart* is usually paired with “from” and *a part* is usually paired with “of.”

3. Assure vs. Ensure

Incorrect: You must take the proper precautions to assure your privacy.

Correct: You must take the proper precautions to ensure your privacy.

To *ensure* something happens is to guarantee it. *Assure* is to tell someone something positively or confidently to remove any doubt. *Greg assured me nothing was wrong. In order to ensure that nothing was wrong, Greg locked the door.*

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4. Who vs. Whom

Incorrect: Who did you give that to?

Correct: To whom did you give that?

Who functions as a subject while *whom* functions as an object. An easy way to remember the difference is to substitute he/him into your sentences. If *he* works, it should be *who*. If *him* works, it should be *whom*. *Who (he) told me to make dinner. You delivered a pizza to whom (him)?*

5. Attain vs. Obtain

Incorrect: Joe worked very hard and obtained a great level of success.

Correct: Joe worked very hard and attained a great level of success.

Attain and *obtain* are both verbs. *Attain* means “to accomplish, reach, or achieve something through effort.” *Obtain* means “to get, acquire, or to gain possession of something.” *Attain* implies effort put forth to produce the outcome.

6. Break vs. Brake

Incorrect: There’s been a brake in the water pipe.

Correct: There’s been a break in the water pipe.

Break can be used as a noun and verb. To *break something* is to cause it to separate into pieces. A *break* is the act or action of breaking. *We took a break at work. Brake* can also be used as a noun and verb. To *brake* is to stop your car.

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7. Capital vs. Capitol

Incorrect: We took a tour of the capital building today.

Correct: We took a tour of the capitol building today.

Capital refers to a city, specifically a governmental seat. It can also be used in a financial sense to describe money or equipment. *Capitol* is a building where a legislature meets.

8. Compliment vs. Complement

Incorrect: Today I received a nice complement from a friend.

Correct: Today I received a nice compliment from a friend.

A *compliment* is a flattering or praising remark. A *complement* is something that completes or brings something to perfection. *Those shoes are the perfect complement for that dress.*

9. Comprise vs. Compose

Incorrect: Fifty states comprise the United States.

Correct: Fifty states compose the United States.

Comprise means “to be made up of.” *Compose* means “to make up the constituent parts of.” With *comprise*, the whole is the subject. With *compose*, the parts are the subject.

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10. Emigrate vs. Immigrate

Incorrect: My grandparents emigrated into the United States.

Correct: My grandparents immigrated into the United States.

To *immigrate* is to enter a new place. To *emigrate* is to leave a place. You immigrate into places and emigrate from places.

11. Everyday vs. Every day

Incorrect: I get coffee before work everyday.

Correct: I get coffee before work every day.

Everyday, when used as a single word, is an adjective meaning commonplace, usual, and suitable for ordinary days. *Every day*, two words, is an adverbial phrase. Substituting “each day” for “every day” will help you keep them separated.

12. Explicit vs. Implicit

Incorrect: Please be implicit; what is it that you want?

Correct: Please be explicit; what is it that you want?

To say something *explicitly* is to spell it out clearly so that it is unambiguous. Something is *implicit* when it is implied or not said clearly and directly.

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13. Invoke vs. Evoke

Incorrect: This comic strip will invoke laughter.

Correct: This comic strip will evoke laughter.

To *invoke* is to assert something as authority or appeal to someone for help. *Great Britain invoked military aid from the United States.* To *evoke* is to bring someone forth or to recall something to the conscious mind. Invoke is a more direct action than evoke.

14. Who vs. That

Incorrect: The woman that opened the door for you is my mom.

Correct: The woman who opened the door for you is my mom.

When referring to inanimate objects or animals without a name, use *that*. When referring to human beings and animals with a name, use *who*.

15. Onto vs. On to

Incorrect: The cat jumped on to the dresser.

Correct: The cat jumped onto the dresser.

Onto is a preposition that means "on top of, to a position on." *On to*, two words, is used when *on* is part of a verb phrase such as "held on." *She held on to the chains while swinging.* A good trick is to mentally say "up" before "on" in a sentence. If it still makes sense, then onto is the correct choice.

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16. Passed vs. Past

Incorrect: The car past me on the left.

Correct: The car passed me on the left.

Passed implied movement of some sort. *Past* is a period of time before the present. *Bill Clinton is a past president.*

17. To vs. Too vs. Two

Incorrect: There are to many people here.

Correct: There are too many people here.

Too means “also, very, or excessive.” *Two* is the number 2. *I need two pizzas.* *To* is just about everything else. *Can you drive me to the mall?*

18. There vs. Their vs. They’re

Incorrect: All of there equipment was loaded into the truck.

Correct: All of their equipment was loaded into the truck.

There is a directional word and is usually paired with “is” or “are.” *Over there is a crocodile.* *Their* is possessive. *Their house is very cute.* *They’re* is a contraction of “they are.” *They’re (they are) moving in next door.*

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19. Toward vs. Towards

The difference between towards and toward is entirely dialectal. In American English, you should use *toward*. In British English, you should use *towards*.

20. Principal vs. Principle

Incorrect: Mr. Babcock is the principle of the high school.

Correct: Mr. Babcock is the principal of the high school.

Principal refers to a person of high authority or prominence. It also has specific meanings in finance and law. *How much have you repaid on the principal of your loan?* *Principle* is a natural, moral legal rule or standard. *The principle of free speech is essential in any democracy.*

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GRAMMAR MISTAKES

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21. This is Him / This is Her

Incorrect: Can I please speak with Rachel? Yes, this is her.

Correct: Can I please speak with Rachel? Yes, this is she.

When someone calls on the phone asking for you, you should always respond by saying *this is he/she* because these words are nominative, not objective.

22. If I Was vs. If I Were

Incorrect: I wish I was rich.

Correct: I wish I were rich.

When you are dealing with counterfactuals or things that are wishful, hopeful, or imaginative, you need to use what is called the subjunctive mood. A good indicator for a subjunctive verb is when you see an "if." *If I were a wealthy man...I wouldn't have to work hard.*

23. Misplaced Modifier

Incorrect: Entering the library, a desk was the first thing I noticed.

Correct: Entering the library, I first noticed a desk.

In the first sentence, a desk is what is entering the library when it should be referring to *me*. There is a simple rule for sentences with a short phrase at the beginning: whatever the beginning phrase refers to should immediately follow the comma.

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24. Using Me Instead of I

Incorrect: Me and my friend are going to the beach.

Correct: My friend and I are going to the beach.

“I” is a subject while “me” is an object. That means that whenever the word in question is acting as the subject of the sentence, you should use “I.” Also, by convention, “I” is secondary in your sentence when others are present. *Steve and I are getting lunch.*

25. Which vs. That

Incorrect: No bags which are over 50 pounds will be permitted.

Correct: No bags that are over 50 pounds will be permitted.

“That” is reserved for restrictive clauses, clauses that are essential to the meaning of a sentence. For nonrestrictive or nonessential clauses, use “which.” *My bedroom, which is on the second floor, has a window.*

26. Referring to a Business as “They”

Incorrect: The company offered a discount to increase their profits.

Correct: The company offered a promotion to increase its profits.

A company or organization is not a plural. It is a singular entity. Furthermore, outside of a legal context, it is not considered a person. Therefore, when referring to a business, “it” is more appropriate than “they.”

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27. Using “Like” as a Conjunction

Incorrect: These people act like they’ve never eaten before today.

Correct: These people act as if they’ve never eaten before today.

Like is a preposition, not a conjunction. It, therefore, takes objects. You shouldn’t see any verbs following it. *I play a guitar just like yours.*

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PUNCTUATION MISTAKES

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28. Semicolons Connect Equal Units

Incorrect: Together we saw a splendid movie; which was a box office smash.

Correct: Together we saw a splendid movie; it was a box office smash.

A lot of people say that semicolons connect two independent clauses. This is true, but they can do more. They connect equal grammatical units, whether they are independent or dependent, so make sure both sides of a semicolon are equal.

29. Comma Splice

Incorrect: John hit the ball, he ran to first base.

Correct: John hit the ball. He ran to first base.

A comma cannot join two independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction in between them. These conjunctions are remembered by the acronym FANBOYS, for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so. *John hit the ball, and he ran to first base.*

30. Missing Comma After Intro Phrase

Incorrect: After he hit the ball he ran to first base.

Correct: After he hit the ball, he ran to first base.

If your main clause is preceded by an introductory clause or phrase, it needs to be set off by a comma.

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31. Comma After Main Clause

Incorrect: John ran to first base, after hitting the ball.

Correct: John ran to first base after hitting the ball.

A comma is not necessary when a clause or phrase appears after the main clause.

32. Quotation Marks to Add Emphasis

Incorrect: When you are cited on the six o'clock news you have "arrived."

Correct: When you are cited on the six o'clock news you have *arrived*.

Quotation marks are not used to add emphasis: italics are. Quotation marks are used to set off exact words that were used by another person or appeared elsewhere. *The president was quoted as saying, "The economy is doing just fine."*

33. Punctuation Outside of Quotes

In American English, punctuation goes inside of quotations, but in British English, it goes on the outside. For example,

American: The president said, "The economy is slowly coming back to life," but that citizens might need to wait a few more months.

British: The president said, "The economy is slowly coming back to life", but that citizens might need to wait a few more months.

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34. Using Ellipses for Pauses

Incorrect: I cannot wait to tell you...I got married!

Correct: I cannot wait to tell you—I got married!

In formal writing, ellipses are not used to indicate pauses. Rather, they are used when words or sentences in a quoted manner are omitted.

Increasingly, in informal contexts, they are used to create a type of suspense in the reader. These types of uses are not appropriate for formal writing.

35. Incorrectly Labeling Times

Incorrect: The party will be from 5:30-6:30.

Correct: The party will be from 5:30 to 6:30.

Correct: The party will be 5:30-6:30.

If you start by saying “between” or “from,” then you need to also use “to.” You cannot use “between” or “from” and a hyphen.

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