

Guide to Common Writing Errors

Mixing up words:

1. *Affect vs. effect* (verb): 'Affect' is the more common and means in general to have an impact. 'Effect' is less common and refers specifically to producing an outcome.
2. *Affect vs. effect* (noun): As a noun (or adjective 'affective'), 'affect' is roughly synonymous with mood. 'Effect' (or adjective effective) is an outcome, an impact, a change.
3. *It's vs. its*: 'It's' is the contraction for 'it is.' 'Its' is the possessive form.
4. *Then vs. than*: 'Then' refers to the point in time. 'Than' is used when making comparisons.
5. *Their vs. there vs. they're*: 'Their' is the possessive. 'There' refers to a place. 'They're' is the contraction for 'they are.'
6. *Your vs. you're*: 'Your' is the possessive. 'You're' is the contraction for 'you are.'
7. *Where vs. were vs. we're*: 'Where' refers to place. 'Were' is the verb, the past tense of 'are.' 'We're' is the contraction for 'we are.'
8. *Whose vs. who's*: 'Whose' is the possessive of 'who,' while 'who's' is the contraction for 'who is.'
9. *Conscience vs. conscious*: 'Conscience' refers to our capacity for moral judgment. 'Conscious' refers to being awake, aware.
10. *Criteria vs. criterion* and *Datum vs. data* and *Stimulus vs. stimuli* and *Phenomenon vs. phenomena* and *medium vs. media*: 'Criterion,' 'datum,' 'stimulus,' 'phenomenon' and 'medium' are singular forms, for which the plurals are 'criteria,' 'data,' 'stimuli,' 'phenomena,' and 'media.'
11. *Whether vs. weather*: 'Whether' involves the question of if something will happen. 'Weather' refers to atmospheric conditions (sunny, rainy, etc.).
12. *To vs. too vs. two*: 'To' is the preposition: give it 'to' me. 'Too' is synonymous with 'also.' 'Two' is the number.
13. *Maybe vs. may be*: 'Maybe' is an adverb used with a verb: 'maybe' he will come. 'May be' is part of a verb form: he 'may be' coming.
14. *Fewer vs. less* and *amount vs. number*: 'Fewer' and 'number' go with plurals that can be counted, while 'less' and 'amount' go with singulars. 'I have less clothing (singular) and fewer clothes (plural);' 'the day doesn't have the same amount of sunshine (singular) and or the same number of hours (plural) of daylight.'
15. *Lose vs. loose*: 'Lose' refers to misplacing something, while 'loose' is the opposite of 'tight.'
16. *Regard vs. regards*: 'Regard' is a synonym for 'reference' (as 'in regard to...') while 'regards' means to "greetings" or 'good wishes' (as in 'give my regards to your mother')
17. *Site vs. cite*: 'Site' is a location, while 'cite' is the verb meaning to 'make reference to a source or an example.'
18. *Principal vs. principle*: 'Principal' as an adjective means 'main' or 'major,' and as a noun it refers to the head of a school or to a sum of money, whereas 'principle' is a basic truth or rule.
19. *Overtime vs. over time* and *Everyday vs. every day*: 'Overtime' refers to extra hours of work, while 'over time' refers to the passage or duration of time; 'everyday' is an adjective modifying a noun, as in 'an everyday occurrence,' while for 'every day,' 'day' itself is the noun, as in 'She came to class every day.' Also be careful about one-word adverbs vs. two-word adjectives; for example: 'I don't love you *anymore*' but 'Do you have *any more* paper?'

Misuse of words:

20. *However*: 'However' cannot be used to link two sentences together as though it were the word 'but.' CORRECT would be 'I am tired but I will do it anyway;' INCORRECT would be 'I am tired, however I will do it anyway.' It would be CORRECT to use 'however' after a period or a semicolon. 'I am tired. However, I will do it anyway' or 'I am tired; however, I will do it anyway.'

21. *While/Although*: 'While' and 'although' are conjunctions and must be linked to another idea; they cannot be used in a clause standing by itself. CORRECT would be 'I am tired although/while I haven't done much (or inverted: 'Although/while I haven't done much, I am tired' , but it would be INCORRECT to just say 'Although/while I haven't done much.'
22. *Whereas*: 'Whereas' (which is all one word, not 'where as') must link two ideas together in a sentence; a clause with 'whereas' cannot stand by itself (see 'although/while' above).

Misspellings:

23. 'Alot' should be 'a lot'
24. 'Can not' should be 'cannot'
25. 'Dependant' and 'independant' should be 'dependent' and 'independent'
26. 'Enviornment' should be 'environment'
27. 'Sever' should be 'severe' (unless you mean to cut apart)
28. 'Reoccur' and 'reoccurrence' should be 'recur' and 'recurrence'
29. 'Ect' should be 'etc.' if you mean 'and so on' (and with the period, because it's an abbreviation)

Grammatical mistakes:

30. Adverb form: adjectives modify nouns, but adverbs must be used to modify verbs and adjectives. INCORRECT would be 'He came quick;' CORRECT would be 'He came quickly.' INCORRECT would be 'Real good;' CORRECT would be 'Really good.'
31. Failure to use connecting words to link clauses: when a single sentence has two or more clauses, the clauses must be linked with a conjunction (and, but, because, so, etc.) or a semi-colon, or two separate sentences should be created. INCORRECT would be 'The subjects arrived, they waited for the experimenter.' CORRECT would be 'The subjects arrived, and they waited for the experimenter.'
32. Mixing or tangling the grammatical structure of a sentence in a way that creates a non-parallel or even illogical or nonsensical statement. INCORRECT would be 'Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire, take a test, and were interviewed by a psychologist.' (non-parallel) CORRECT would be 'Participants were asked to complete a question, take a test, and be interviewed by a psychologist.' INCORRECT would be 'For most drivers who have a blood alcohol level of .05 percent double their risk of causing an accident.' (tangled) CORRECT would be 'Most drivers who have a blood alcohol level of .05 double their risk of causing an accident.'
33. Incomplete sentences: formal writing should always be in the form of complete sentences, which require a subject and a predicate with a proper verb form. As explained in 18, 19 and 20 above, clauses that begin with conjunctions do not constitute complete sentences; instead, they should be linked to the preceding sentence. Participle forms (verbs with the 'ing' ending) are not stand-alone verbs in a complete sentence. INCORRECT would be 'An example being...;' CORRECT would be 'An example is...'
34. Dangling participle: certain phrases with participles (the 'ing' form of verbs) must be closely connected to what they modify; when they don't, they are said to be dangling. INCORRECT would be 'Running out of the house, the policeman shot the burglar.' In this instance, we can't be sure who was running because we would assume it was the burglar but the participle is closest to the policeman. CORRECT would be 'Running out of the house, the burglar was shot by the policeman.'
35. Maintaining consistency of singular vs. plural usage: in any one sentence (and usually in any one paragraph), the subjects, pronouns and verb forms must be consistently singular or plural when they refer to each other. INCORRECT would be 'A patient (singular) is helped to express their (plural) feelings,' or 'When a subject (singular) arrived, they (plural) were (plural) told to sit down.' CORRECT would be 'A patient is helped to express his feelings' and 'When a subject

arrived, he was told to sit down.' To avoid what some people regard as sexist language, use all plural forms: 'Patients are helped to express their feelings,' and 'When subjects arrived, they were told to sit down'). Such words as 'everyone,' 'everybody' and 'someone' are singular and must be used with singular verb forms and pronouns: 'Everyone took his seat' (or, to avoid sexist language, 'All the guests took their seats).

36. Maintaining consistency of verb tense: when a series of actions is being described, all the verbs in the series must be consistent for tense. It is incorrect to switch back and forth between present and past tenses. INCORRECT would be 'When the subjects arrived (past tense) for the experiment, ' When the subjects arrived (past tense) for the experiment, they were (past tense) told to wait,' or 'When the subjects arrive (present tense) for the experiment, they are (present tense) told to wait.'
37. Use of apostrophe: the apostrophe is used to create possessive and contraction forms of words, but *not* to create plural forms. For possessives, the usual rule is 's for a singular noun or plural noun with no final s, and s' for a plural that has the s. CORRECT would be 'The observer's (singular) rating was positive' and 'The observers' (plural) ratings were positive.' INCORRECT would be 'The observers' compared ratings' because in this instance *observers* is simply a plural, not a possessive. Plurals of acronyms (abbreviations created by combining the first letters of several words) also do not usually contain apostrophes: INCORRECT would be SAT's or MRI's; CORRECT is SATs or MRIs. For contractions, 'do not' becomes *don't* and 'is not' becomes *isn't*. (Note the exception to these rules in #3.)
38. Use of commas: the rules for commas are fairly complex, but in general, commas are used to separate items in a series, clauses in a compound sentence, and subordinate clauses from the rest of the sentence. The rule of thumb is to use a comma the same way you would use a pause if you were speaking, and to use (or not use) a comma to avoid misunderstanding. Note also that a semi-colon (;) is not the same as a comma; semi-colons usually separate clauses as I just did in this sentence.
39. Who vs. whom, he vs. him, I vs. me: 'Who,' 'he' ('she,' 'we,' etc.) and 'I' are used for the subjects of a sentence, while 'whom,' 'him' ('her,' 'us,' etc.), and 'me' are used as objects of verbs or prepositions. INCORRECT would be 'It was a secret between he and I.' CORRECT would be 'It was a secret between him and me.' INCORRECT would be 'He was the only person whom arrived on time.' CORRECT would be 'He was the only person who arrived on time.'
40. Using pronouns that have no clear antecedent: Any time you use a pronoun ('he,' 'they,' 'it,' etc.) in a sentence, the pronoun must have a clear antecedent noun, that is, a noun that comes before it to which the pronoun refers. For example, 'The mother and daughter were talking, and she said she shouldn't be upset;' the 'she' is unclear because there are two possible antecedent nouns - who said who shouldn't be upset?
41. Punctuating quotations: Although there are some special exceptions, in general, periods and commas at the end of a quotation belong *inside* the end-quotation mark while semi-colons and colons go outside the end-quotation mark. Question marks and exclamation points go inside only if actually part of the quote. One exception is when following APA style to cite the source for a quotation, where the punctuation goes after the citation: Many experts believe that "the scientific evidence unequivocally supports this, and only this, conclusion" (Smith & Brown, 1999, p. 226).
42. Creating passive or past tense or adjective forms of verbs: When verbs are used in passive voice or as adjectives, the verb needs to be in its past tense form. INCORRECT would be 'The argument was cut and dry.' CORRECT would be 'The argument was cut and dried.' INCORRECT would be 'He was suppose to arrive on time.' CORRECT would be 'He was supposed to arrive on time.'

Style Issues

43. When writing numbers, the numeral form should not be used to begin a sentence. INCORRECT would be '14 people were recruited as subjects.' CORRECT would be 'Fourteen people were recruited as subjects.'
44. A paragraph should not contain just a single sentence.
45. Avoid the use of the word "you" in formal writing.
46. Avoid the use of contractions ("isn't," "can't," etc.), slang, instant-messaging shorthand, slang, exaggerated or highly-emotional wording, and profanity
47. Multi-page printed documents should have page numbers inserted (but note that a Title page, if you use one, is not a numbered page)
48. Paragraphs should be indented 5 spaces. Electronic documents should be single-spaced within paragraphs and double-spaced between paragraphs and after headings, sub-headings, etc. Printed documents should be double-spaced throughout.