

# 100 Writing Mistakes to Avoid

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**A practical guide to 100 common mistakes  
of spelling, usage, grammar, and punctuation.**

By

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# INTRODUCTION

**T**his book is for writers who want to avoid the most common errors of written English without spending a lot of time looking things up.

The list of 100 spelling, usage, and punctuation errors does not include every possible mistake, but it covers a great many "howlers" that can put off potential customers and clients.

A few entries feature a spelling or usage that differs in British and American English, or an expression or rule on which thoughtful people disagree. These entries are marked with an asterisk (\*).

Grammar terms and grammatical explanations have been kept to a minimum, but it is expected that the reader will be familiar with the English parts of speech and such basic terms as *subject*, *object*, *clause*, and *phrase*.

The most essential pair of tools for every writer is a good dictionary and a respected style guide. To avoid the most commonly-encountered writing errors, however, the writer in a hurry can save time by looking here first.

# SPELLING MISTAKES

## 1. accept / except

INCORRECT: Please except this gift.

CORRECT: Please accept this gift.

*Except*, as a verb, means to exclude or leave out. As a preposition it means "with the exception of." *Accept* means "to receive willingly." For example: *We visited every landmark except the Eiffel Tower. The school is accepting only those students who have had their shots; all others are excepted.*

## 2. advice / advise

INCORRECT: He refused to take my advise.

CORRECT: He refused to take my advice.

*Advise* is a verb. The s has the sound of "z." *Advice* is a noun. The c has the sound of "s."

## 3. all right / alright

INCORRECT: He's alright after his fall.

CORRECT: He's all right after his fall.

Although arguments are advanced for the acceptance of the spelling, *alright* is still widely regarded as nonstandard. Careful writers avoid it.

#### 4. awhile / a while

**INCORRECT:** I'll be staying in Paris for awhile.

**CORRECT:** I'll be staying in Paris for a while.

*Awhile* is an adverb that means "for a while." *While* is a noun that means "a period of time." A *while* is a phrase that means "for a period of time." Because *awhile* means "for a while," to say *for awhile* is like saying "for for a while."

#### 5. alot / a lot

**INCORRECT:** I like you alot.

**CORRECT:** I like you a lot.

Despite being used widely, "alot" is not a word. A *lot* is the correct spelling.

#### 6. allude / elude / illude

**INCORRECT:** The writer eluded to the Odyssey.

**CORRECT:** The writer alluded to the Odyssey.

*Elude* means "to escape," usually by means of swift or clever action. *Allude* means "to refer to indirectly." *Illude* is an obsolete spelling for *delude* and *elude*.

## 7. cannot / can not

INCORRECT: I can not go with you today.

CORRECT: I cannot go with you today.

In speech and informal writing, *cannot* is frequently contracted as *can't*. In writing the uncontracted form, *cannot* is preferred.

## 8. complement / compliment

INCORRECT: I want to complement you on your writing style.

CORRECT: I want to compliment you on your writing style.

*Complement*, most frequently used as a verb, means "to complete." *Compliment*, used as a verb, means "to make a courteous remark." As a noun, it means "a courteous remark." For example: *The illustrations complement the text. She complimented his singing. Sallie has difficulty accepting compliments.*

## 9. effect / affect

INCORRECT: His death really effected me.

CORRECT: His death really affected me.

The most common use of *effect* is as a noun meaning "something produced by a cause." The most common use of *affect* is as a transitive verb meaning "to act upon." For example: *The disease had a lasting effect on the child. The family's lack of money affected his plans.*

**10. every day / everyday**

**INCORRECT:** Dan walks the dog everyday at six p.m.

**CORRECT:** Dan walks the dog every day at six p.m.

*Everyday* is an adjective that means "daily." *Every day* is a phrase that combines the adjective *every* with the noun *day*. For example: *Walking the dog is an everyday occurrence. I practice the flute every day.*

**11. forty / fourty**

**INCORRECT:** She made the check out for fourty dollars.

**CORRECT:** She made the check out for forty dollars.

The number 4 is spelled *four*. The number 40 is spelled *forty*.

**12. its / it's**

**INCORRECT:** Put the saw back in it's place.

**CORRECT:** Put the saw back in its place.

*It's* is a contraction that represents two words: *it is*. *Its* is a one-word third-person singular possessive adjective, like *his*. For example: *The man lost his hat. The dog wagged its tail.*

### 13. **irregardless / regardless**

**INCORRECT:** I want you here at six a.m., irregardless of how late you go to bed tonight.

**CORRECT:** I want you here at six a.m., regardless of how late you go to bed tonight.

Although listed in dictionaries and widely used colloquially, the word "irregardless" is to be avoided as nonstandard usage.

### 14. **\*inquire / enquire**

These are two spellings of the same word. *Enquire* tends to be more common in British usage, while *inquire* is more common in American usage. The British newspaper *The Guardian* prefers *inquire*, and the Oxford English Dictionary considers *enquire* to be "an alternate form of *inquire*." The forms *inquire* and *inquiry* are the safe choices when no official writing guidelines are being followed.

### 15. **\*license / licence**

**license:** verb, "to grant permission"

**licence:** noun, "permission, liberty"

In British usage, *licence* is the spelling of the noun; *license* is the spelling of the verb. In American usage, both the noun and the verb are spelled *license*.



**16. lightning / lightening**

**INCORRECT:** The hen house was struck by lightening last night.

**CORRECT:** The hen house was struck by lightning last night.

*Lightning* means the flashing caused by an electrical discharge in the atmosphere. *Lightening* means "state of becoming brighter," or "lessening the weight of something." *Mixing in some white is one way of lightening the dark blue paint. The camel driver is lightening the load by removing the trunk.*

**17. loose / lose**

**INCORRECT:** I'm afraid you'll loose your way in the dark.

**CORRECT:** I'm afraid you'll lose your way in the dark.

As an adjective, *loose* means "not tight." *Lose* is a verb with such meanings as "go astray from," "fail to keep up with," "suffer deprivation." For example: *Athletes prefer loose clothing for exercise. He frequently loses his car keys.* Note: The s in *loose* has a soft sound. The s in *lose* has the sound of z.

**18. passed / past**

**INCORRECT:** The car past the train.

**CORRECT:** The car passed the train.

*Past* is used as an adverb of place, or as a preposition. *Passed* is the past tense of the verb *to pass*. For example: *The past few days have been hectic. The deadline has passed. He passed her the biscuits. The boys ran past the gate. As we stood in the doorway, the cat ran past.*

### 19. pore / pour

**INCORRECT:** The students were up until midnight, pouring over their books.

**CORRECT:** The students were up until midnight, poring over their books.

*Pore* is a verb meaning "to look at attentively." *Pour* is a verb meaning "to cause to flow."

### 20. prescribe / proscribe

**INCORRECT:** What did the doctor proscribe for your headache?

**CORRECT:** What did the doctor prescribe for your headache?

*Prescribe* in this context means "to give directions for." *Proscribe* means "to condemn or forbid as harmful." *The use of any kind of drug is proscribed in the workplace.*

### 21. principle / principal

**INCORRECT:** The principle kept us after school.

**CORRECT:** The principal kept us after school.

As a noun, *principle* means "a general truth." As a noun referring to a person, *principal* means "the person in authority." The cloying but useful mnemonic for this one is "The principal is your pal."

## 22. pronunciation / pronounciation

**INCORRECT:** I have trouble understanding his pronounciation.

**CORRECT:** I have trouble understanding his pronunciation.

Although the verb is *pronounce*, the noun is *pronunciation*.

## 23. quiet / quite

**INCORRECT:** We spent a quite evening reading.

**CORRECT:** We spent a quiet evening reading.

*Quiet* is an adjective meaning "marked by little or no activity." *Quite* is an adverb meaning "to a considerable extent." Example: *The children are quite amiable today.* *Quiet* can also be used as a noun. For example: *We enjoyed the quiet by the lake.* (The suffix "ness" should never be added to the abstract nouns *quiet* and *calm*.)

## 24. then / than

**INCORRECT:** I have more eggs then you.

**CORRECT:** I have more eggs than you.

*Then* is an adverb that indicates time. It can go anywhere in a sentence. For example: *The man paused by the door and then entered. Then the noise started.* As conjunction or preposition, *than* will always be followed by a noun or a pronoun. *I like Melville better than Hawthorne.*

## 25. thought / tough / through / though

The *ough* spelling in each of these words represents a different vowel sound: *thought*, *ough*= [aw]; *tough*, *ough*= [uh]; *through*: *ough*= [oo], and *though*: *ough*= [ō].

*thought*: "the action or process of thinking": *He was lost in thought.* As a verb, it is the past tense of *think*: *I thought you had already gone.*

*tough*: adjective, "not easily broken or taken apart": *The hide of the rhinoceros is extremely tough.* Figuratively one can speak of "a tough person" or "a tough job."

*through*: preposition expressing the relation of movement within something, from one end to the opposite end or side. *The train passed through the tunnel. The needle went through the cloth.*

*though*: conjunction, "although" or "in spite of the fact that." *Though he had a broken leg, he managed to reach the fort.* As an adverb, *though* can mean "nevertheless" *She said she would not attend the wedding. She did, though.*

## 26. there / they're / their

**INCORRECT:** They parked there car on the lawn.

**CORRECT:** They parked their car on the lawn.

*There* is an adverb of place. It can stand anywhere in a sentence. *They're* is a contraction of "they are." *Their* is a possessive adjective. It must be followed by a noun. For example: *I don't know why they're always late. Tell them to put their coats on the bed. I don't want to go there.*

### 27. to / two / too

**INCORRECT:** I'm to tired to go out again.

**CORRECT:** I'm too tired to go out again.

*To* is a preposition that indicates direction. It is also a particle used with a verb infinitive. *Too* is an adverb used to indicate excess. *Two* is the spelling of the numeral 2. For example: *Let's all go to the lobby. Remember to brush your teeth. They ate too much pizza. You may have two pieces.*

### 28. weather / whether / wether

**INCORRECT:** He never knows weather to phone or just drop by.

**CORRECT:** He never knows whether to phone or just drop by.

*Weather* is a noun that refers to the state of the atmosphere. (It can also be used, literally or figuratively, as a verb with the meaning "to stand up to and survive.")

*Whether* is a function word with various uses. A *wether* is a castrated sheep or goat. Examples: *When will you know whether or not you can come? The weather should be mild this weekend. The passengers weathered the storm without too much sickness. The bell-wether led the flock.*

**29. wreck / wreak**

**INCORRECT:** The wizard plans to wreck vengeance on the outlanders.

**CORRECT:** The wizard plans to wreak vengeance on the outlanders.

*Wreck*, as a verb, means "to reduce to a ruinous state by violence." It is pronounced with a short e, rhyming with *neck*. *Wreak* means "to inflict" or "bring about." It is pronounced with a long e, rhyming with *sneak*.

**30. who's / whose**

**INCORRECT:** I don't know who's dog you're talking about.

**CORRECT:** I don't know whose dog you're talking about.

*Who's* is the contracted form of "who is." *Whose* is the possessive adjective form of *who*. For example: *Who's your daddy? Whose car are we going in?*

**31. your / you're**

**INCORRECT:** Give me you're advice.

**CORRECT:** Give me your advice.

*You're* is a contraction that represents the words "you are." *Your* is the second person plural possessive adjective. For example: *You're my best friend. Is that your key on the ground?*

# USAGE MISTAKES

## 32. averse / adverse

**INCORRECT:** I'm not adverse to a glass of wine at dinner

**CORRECT:** I'm not averse to a glass of wine at dinner.

*Averse* is an adjective meaning "having an active feeling of repugnance or dislike." *Adverse* is an adjective meaning "being in opposition to one's interests." For example: *Is he averse to eating meat? Do you think the judge will deliver an adverse opinion?*

## 33. abstract nouns ending with -ness

**INCORRECT:** Anwar Sadat was admired for his courageousness.

**CORRECT:** Anwar Sadat was admired for his courage.

The suffix *-ness* is correctly added to many adjectives to form an abstract noun. For example, *good/goodness*, *red/redness*. However, many English adjectives have abstract noun forms that are not formed with a suffix. With a few exceptions, it is a weakness of style to create a "ness" form when a distinctive form already exists. Examples: *silent/silence*, *curious/curiosity*, *brave/bravery*, *courageous/courage*, *valiant/valor*, *cowardly/cowardice*, *greedy/greed*, *mature/maturity*.

**34. a / an**

**INCORRECT:** Meet me here in a hour.

**CORRECT:** Meet me here in an hour.

The rule is to use the article *a* before words beginning with a consonant sound, and *an* before words beginning with a vowel sound: *a dog, an eel, an hour*.

Only a few English words begin with an unvoiced h: *an heir to the throne, an honest man, an honorable man*. The same principles of pronunciation apply to abbreviations, acronyms and the like: *a URL, an @ symbol, an SUV*.

**35. anyway / anyways / any way**

**INCORRECT:** Who reads my paper anyways?

**CORRECT:** Who reads my paper anyway?

*Anyway* is an adverb, and it means "regardless" or "in any event": *Penelope never completes her homework assignments, but she expects to go to college anyway*. *Any way* is a phrase meaning "any particular course, direction, or manner": *Our dog tries to get out of his pen any way he can*.

"Anyways" is a nonstandard form to be avoided by careful speakers and writers.



### 36. bring / take

Both *bring* and *take* indicate the conveyance of something from one place to another. Which to use depends upon context. A mother organizing her family for a trip to the zoo, for example, might say "Everybody bring a jacket." She's going too. If, however, she's staying home, she would say "Everybody take a jacket." Something going away from the speaker is *taken*. Something going to or with the speaker is *brought*.

### 37. between you and me / I

**INCORRECT:** Keep this information just between you and I.

**CORRECT:** Keep this information just between you and me.

*Between* is a preposition. *Me* is the object form of the pronoun I. When a pronoun follows a preposition, the object form is required.

### 38. before / ago

**INCORRECT:** He left his money to a woman he had met many years ago.

**CORRECT:** He left his money to a woman he had met many years before.

*Ago* means "at a certain time before now." It refers to a time before the present. *Before* means "at any time before now."

When the event referred to occurred at a specific time in the past, the simple past form of the verb is used:

*Alexander the Great lived many years ago.*

*Five years ago, my brother worked in Detroit.*

If the event referred to occurred before another past event, then the choice of adverb should be *before*, *earlier*, or *previously*:

*We learned that our favorite tree had been cut down many years before.*

### 39. **beg the question / raise the question**

**INCORRECT:** His position on tax reform begs the question, does wealth redistribution really help the poor?

**CORRECT:** His position on tax reform raises the question, does wealth redistribution really help the poor?

*To beg the question* is a rhetorical term to describe the logical fallacy of assuming the truth of an unsupported assertion. For example, *Dr. Locke grades unfairly because he never gives me any grade higher than a C on my papers*. The unproved assumption is that the papers are of a quality to merit a higher grade. The student is "begging the question." If you find yourself following "beg the question" with a question, you are using the expression incorrectly. The expression you are looking for is "raise the question."

### 40. **\*could care less / couldn't care less**

Much breath and ink are expended in arguing about this expression, yet both forms of it have been in the language for more than half a century, and both are used with exactly the same meaning.

Pedants argue that "I could care less" is illogical because if one could care less, one therefore cares a little. When it comes to idiom, logic is frequently irrelevant. Whether the "not" appears or not, speakers who use the expression are not chopping logic. What they mean is that they don't care. Linguist Mark Liberman estimates that in American English anyway, the use of "could care less" exceeds that of "couldn't care less" by a ratio of

about 5 to 1. Nevertheless, the proponents of "couldn't care less" can be quite excitable. If you're going to be graded, better go with the negative form.

#### 41. can / may

**INCORRECT:** He wants to know if he can borrow the car tonight.

**CORRECT:** He wants to know if he may borrow the car tonight.

The difference between *can* and *may* is one of ability versus permission. Not everyone observes the distinction, but it is a graceful usage.

#### 42. double negative

**INCORRECT:** I don't get no respect.

**CORRECT:** I don't get any respect.

Although common in regional dialects and in earlier forms of English, the use of a double negative is considered to be incorrect in modern standard English. Double negative: a construction that contains two negative elements such as *no* and *not*.

#### 43. disinterested / uninterested

**INCORRECT:** Charlie is totally disinterested in algebra.

**CORRECT:** Charlie is totally uninterested in algebra.

*Disinterested* implies impartiality. *Uninterested* implies lack of interest. For example: *The financial dispute was settled by a disinterested third party. Many students are uninterested in their assignments.*

#### 44. \*different from / different to / different than

Preferred by H. W. Fowler in his landmark *Modern English Usage*, *different from* is considered by many speakers, both British and American, to be the only correct form of the comparative phrase. According to *AskOxford*, "There is little difference in sense between *different from*, *different to*, and *different than*. *Different from* is generally regarded as the correct use in British English, while *different than* is largely restricted to North America." *Different to* is also common in British speech.

#### 45. either is / either are

**INCORRECT:** Either Jack or Joan are correct.

**CORRECT:** Either Jack or Joan is correct.

*Either*, which may be either a pronoun or an adjective, is singular. Its modern meaning is "one or the other of two."

When *either* introduces a choice between two things, the verb must be singular: *Either the Honda or the Ford belongs to Harry. Either one of the books is a good choice.*

Confusion arises when *either* introduces an *either...or* construction in which one of the choices is singular and one is plural. In such a case, the verb will agree with the nearer noun: *Either hot dogs or pizza is on the menu for tonight. Either pizza or hot dogs are on the menu for tonight.*

*Neither*, like *either*, is a singular word that usually takes a singular verb. In a neither...nor construction that contains a singular noun and a plural noun, the verb agrees with a plural noun that comes before it: *Neither bad morals nor hypocrisy is wanted in a public official. Neither hypocrisy nor bad morals are wanted in a public official.*

#### 46. \*each / their

Each writer should have their own computer.  
All writers should have their own computers.

Because *each* is singular, words relating back to *each* should be singular. *Their* is plural and therefore does not agree in number with *each*. The same goes for *everyone*, *everybody*, and all singular nouns. However, many speakers and writers have been breaking this rule in certain contexts since at least the 16th century.

In the past, no objection was made to the use of singular *his* in a construction like this one: *Each writer should have his own computer.* Concerns about gender equality have made this use of "his" unacceptable when the antecedent is perceived to include women as well as men. Bottom line: each/their is no longer perceived as a gross grammatical fault. Writers who still shudder at the yoking of *each* and *their* can rewrite such sentences in the plural.

#### 47. economic / economical

**INCORRECT:** Eating at home is more economic than dining out.

**CORRECT:** Eating at home is more economical than dining out.

*Economic* refers to economics and the economy. *Economical* refers to getting the most value for one's money. *The government must address serious economic problems. Families living on reduced means must make economical food choices.*

#### 48. e.g. / i.e.

**INCORRECT:** Boswell asked Dr. Johnson about every trivial detail, *e.g.*, he made himself a daily nuisance.

**CORRECT:** Boswell asked Dr. Johnson about every trivial detail, *i.e.*, he made himself a daily nuisance.

The abbreviation *e.g.* stands for the Latin expression *exempli gratia* and means "for example. The abbreviation *i.e.* stands for the Latin expression *id est* ("it is") and is used in English to mean "in other words." *The farmer grows several kinds of soft fruit, e.g., strawberries, blueberries, and grapes.*

#### 49. free rein / free reign

**INCORRECT:** Unfortunately, their parents give them free reign on the weekends.

**CORRECT:** Unfortunately, their parents give them free rein on the weekends.

*Free rein* is a term that originated with riding. It refers to holding the horse's reins loosely, so as to permit the horse to move more freely. The figurative sense relates to any kind of unimpeded freedom. *Reign* refers to the authority of a monarch. Although commonly seen, "free reign" is incorrect.

## 50. flammable / inflammable

**INCORRECT:** These pajamas can't burn because they're inflammable.

**CORRECT:** These pajamas CAN burn because they're inflammable.

Both words, *flammable* and *inflammable*, mean "capable of bursting into flames." In modern usage the term *inflammable* is being dropped because the prefix *-in*, which means "into" in *inflammable*, is often confused with the prefix *-in* which means "not." The better practice is to use *nonflammable* as the opposite of *flammable*.

## 51. \*farther/further

*Farther* is the comparative of the adjective *far*. It is used as an adverb to mean "to or at a more advanced point." For example: *He rode farther down the road.* Some speakers argue a difference between the adverbial uses of *farther* and *further*. In general usage, however, the choice between *farther* and *further* is a matter of preference. *He rode further down the road.*

As a verb, *further* means "to help forward, to assist." *He would stop at nothing to further his ambition.*

## 52. good / better / best

**INCORRECT:** Who's the best runner, Jack or Jill?

**CORRECT:** Who's the better runner, Jack or Jill?

*Good* has the irregular comparative forms *better* and *best*. The word *better* is used to compare two people or things: *This rope is better than that one.* The word *best* used to compare three or more people or things: *Charlie is the best player on the football team.*

### 53. good / well

**INCORRECT:** I hope I did good on the exam.

**CORRECT:** I hope I did well on the exam.

*Good* is an adjective. *Well* is an adverb. When describing an action, the word to use is *well*. A great many English speakers cringe when they hear "I'm doing good" as the response to the polite question "How are you doing?" Writers aiming at standard usage acceptable to a wide audience will do well to avoid using *good* as an adverb.

### 54. historic / historical

**INCORRECT:** The signing of the bill today will be a historical event.

**CORRECT:** The signing of the bill today will be a historic event.

*Historical* is an adjective that refers to anything that has happened in the past. *Historic* is an adjective to describe an event or invention that had or will have a major impact on future events. For example: *The novel is based on historical events in the settling of the American West. The driving of the Golden Spike was a historic event.* Note: Some speakers use *an* before the words *historical* and *historic*.



**55. incident / incidence**

**INCORRECT:** The witness described the incidence to the police.

**CORRECT:** The witness described the incident to the police.

*Incidence* is a noun meaning "the extent of something's influence." *Incident* is a noun meaning "an occurrence or an event." For example: *The incident involved a trailer truck and a Miata. What is the incidence of poverty among women?*

**56. imply / infer**

**INCORRECT:** His use of that word infers that he doesn't trust you.

**CORRECT:** His use of that word implies that he doesn't trust you.

The verb *imply* means to suggest a meaning. The person who *implies* something hints at it without saying it directly. The verb *infer* means to take meaning from. The person who *infers* draws a conclusion by interpreting words or actions. For example: *Because you are always late, I infer that you don't want to work here.*

**57. in / on**

**INCORRECT:** The ship is sailing in the water.

**CORRECT:** The ship is sailing on the water.

The use of prepositions in English is frequently idiomatic. General guidelines exist, but they cannot cover all the expressions involving prepositions. *In* denotes "state of being somewhere within." *On* indicates "proximity and position, above or outside."

### 58. less / fewer

**INCORRECT:** This box contains less fire crackers.

**CORRECT:** This box contains fewer fire crackers.

*Less* is used with uncounted nouns: *less soup, less intelligence, less forage.*

*Fewer* is used with countable nouns: *fewer voters, fewer apples, fewer commercials.*

### 59. lend / loan / borrow

**INCORRECT:** Will you loan me a pencil?

**CORRECT:** Will you lend me a pencil.

The verbs *lend* and *loan* both mean "to grant the temporary possession of a thing." The verb *borrow* means "to take a thing with the intention of returning it." In a business transaction, *lend*, *loan*, and *borrow* all imply an exchange of money and securities.

In a non-business context, *lend* and *borrow* do not imply the existence of a financial transaction. *May I borrow the car for the evening? Will you lend me a pencil?* However, for many speakers, the connotation of lending for hire clings to the word *loan*. For that reason *lend* is preferable to *loan* in an informal situation.

## 60. Miss / Mrs / Ms

**INCORRECT:** Address the letter to Miss Jones.

**CORRECT:** Address the letter to Ms. Jones.

*Miss*, denoting an unmarried woman, is an honorific no longer considered acceptable in common use because it identifies a woman according to marital status.

*Mrs.*, denoting a married woman, is considered unacceptable for the same reason.

*Ms.* is an honorific that pertains to any woman, without indicating marital status.

NOTE: In American usage, both *Ms.* and *Mrs.* are written with periods. In British usage the periods are omitted.

## 61. \*mankind / humankind

The word *mankind* has been used for many generations with the meaning of "all humankind." In recent years, however, many English speakers have come to feel that *mankind* excludes women. Modern usage prefers the use of the word *humankind*.

## 62. people / persons

**INCORRECT:** I don't know any of the persons in this room.

**CORRECT:** I don't know any of the people in this room.

Although the word *person* has the plural *persons*, in most non-legal contexts *people* is the preferred plural of *person*.

### 63. Scotch / Scots / Scottish

**INCORRECT:** The Scotch people value education.

**CORRECT:** The Scottish people value education.

Scotch is an adjective still used in certain established expressions such as Scotch whisky or Scotch broth. In other contexts, however, it is considered unacceptable. For example: "Scotchmen" or "the Scotch government."

Use *Scots* or *Scottish* in a general context to convey the idea of belonging to or being from Scotland: *a Scotswoman*, *The Scotsman* (newspaper), *the Scottish weather*, *the Scottish parliament*. The word for the nationality is *Scots*. Example: *Robert the Bruce is a hero to the Scots*.

### 64. sooner than / when

**INCORRECT:** No sooner had the dogcatcher turned his back when the boy released the stray.

**CORRECT:** No sooner had the dogcatcher turned his back than the boy released the stray.

Modern usage prefers *than* to *when* as the conjunction to be used in this expression.

**65. there is / are**

**INCORRECT:** There's some children at the door.

**CORRECT:** There are some children at the door.

*There's* is a contraction of "there is." When the word *there* is used to begin a sentence, the verb that follows it should agree with the true subject of the sentence. For example, *There is a cat on the fence.* ("cat" is the true subject) *There are some children at the door.* ("children" is the true subject.)

A tendency in spoken English is to begin "there" sentences with the contraction "there's," regardless of whether the subject word is singular or plural. In writing, however, there's no reason not to make the verb "to be" agree in number with the true subject of the sentence. Note: Sentences that begin with *there* can usually be improved by putting the true subject first and replacing *is* or *are* with a more vivid verb.

**66. these / those**

**INCORRECT:** Do you see these books over there?

**CORRECT:** Do you see those books over there?

*These* is the plural of *this*. Used as either a demonstrative adjective or a demonstrative pronoun, *these* indicates objects or persons nearby.

*Those* is the plural of *that*. Used as either a demonstrative adjective or a demonstrative pronoun, *those* indicates objects or persons at a distance.

Used together, the words *these* and *those* indicate contrast or opposition: *Do you want these or those?* Note: The same is true of the singular forms *this* and *that*: *Eat this, not that.*

### 67. waiting on / waiting for

**INCORRECT:** We waited on the bus, but it never came.

**CORRECT:** We waited for the bus, but it never came.

The expression *wait on* means "to serve," as in a business establishment: *The woman waited on the customer.* *Wait for* implies expectation or anticipation. *The child is waiting for Santa Claus.*

# GRAMMAR MISTAKES

## 68. dangling participle

**INCORRECT:** Reported missing a month ago, police have recovered the body of a young girl.

**CORRECT:** The body of a young girl reported missing a month ago has been recovered by police.

Verb forms ending in *-ing* or *-ed* are called participles. They can be used as adjectives, either alone, or as the first word in a descriptive phrase. A common error is to follow a participial phrase with the wrong noun, as in the example above. The noun being described by "reported" is "girl," not "police."

## 69. if I was / if I were

**INCORRECT:** If I was a rich man, I'd buy houses for all my children.

**CORRECT:** If I were a rich man, I'd buy houses for all my children.

Although more and more English speakers fail to observe the use of *were* in an if clause that makes a statement contrary to fact, it's a usage that careful writers will probably continue to observe for a while yet. If the statement is contrary to fact, use *were*. In some contexts the if clause may contain a factual statement for which "was" is the suitable choice: *If I was listening at the door, I had my reasons.* (The speaker had in fact been listening at the door.)

**70. if I would / if I had / if I did**

**INCORRECT:** If I would have known about the party, I would have gone to it.

**CORRECT:** If I had known about the party, I would have gone to it.

When speaking of an event that might have happened in the past but didn't, we use an if clause containing the helping verb "had" followed by a main clause containing "would": *If I had known you were coming, I would have baked a cake.* This use is sometimes called the "third conditional."

Another error made with the third conditional is to use the auxiliary "did" in the if clause:

**INCORRECT:** If Captain Jones didn't pull me from that burning car, I would be dead.

**CORRECT:** if Captain Jones hadn't pulled me from that burning car, I would be dead.

**71. lay / lie (to recline)**

**INCORRECT:** I think I'll lay down for a few minutes.

**CORRECT:** I think I'll lie down for a few minutes.

*Lay* is the past tense of the verb *to lie*, "to recline." For example: *Today I lie in the hammock. Yesterday I lay in the hammock. I have lain in the hammock for hours. I am lying there because I like it.*



**72. lay / lie** ("to place")

**INCORRECT:** Lie the book on the table.

**CORRECT:** Lay the book on the table.

*Lay* is the present tense of the verb *to lay*, "to place." For example: *Today I lay the book on the table. Yesterday I laid the book on the table. I have already laid the book on the table. I am laying the book on the table.* Note: When *lay* means "to place," it will always have an object.

**73. \*Microsoft is/are**

American usage: *Microsoft is settling with another software distributor.*

British usage: *Microsoft are settling with another software distributor.*

In British English, collective nouns and the names of organizations can take either a singular or plural verb, depending upon whether the entity is being thought of as a single thing or as a collection of individual things or persons. In American usage, such words almost always take a singular verb.

**74. me / I**

**INCORRECT:** Me and Jamie are going to Mexico.

**CORRECT:** Jamie and I are going to Mexico.

*Me* is the object form of the pronoun *I*. It should never be used as the subject of a verb. The same applies to the other object pronoun forms *him*, *her*, *us*, and *them*.

This error occurs most frequently in compound subjects:

**INCORRECT:**

Him, Sallie, and Fred moved to Arizona.  
Her and her children live behind the stadium.  
Laurie and them said "hello."

**CORRECT:**

Sallie, Fred, and he moved to Arizona.  
She and her children live behind the stadium.  
Laurie and they said "hello."

**75. myself / I**

**INCORRECT:** Sophie and myself volunteer three days a month at the homeless shelter.

**CORRECT:** Sophie and I volunteer three days a month at the homeless shelter.

*Myself* is a pronoun whose function is to restate the subject *I*: *I cut myself shaving. Sometimes I talk to myself as I work. I wouldn't have believed it myself.* It is never correct to use *myself* as the subject of a verb, or anywhere in a sentence in which *I* is not the subject.

**76. none is / none are**

**INCORRECT:** None of the boys are qualified to play.

**CORRECT:** None of the boys is qualified to play.

*None* is a singular word. It means “not one.” It takes a singular verb.

### 77. \*preposition at the end of a sentence

Many writers go to great lengths in the effort to avoid ending a sentence with a preposition in the mistaken belief that to do so is to break a rule of “good English.” This superstition arose from the practice of 17th-century writers like John Dryden (1631-1700) whose familiarity with and admiration for Latin led them to apply rules of Latin grammar to the writing of English. The result was often at odds with English idiom. Whether or not to end a sentence with a preposition is a stylistic choice, not an unforgivable sin.

### 78. ran/run

INCORRECT: The dog has ran away.

CORRECT: The dog has run away.

*Run* is an irregular verb whose past participle form (*run*) is the same as the present form. The simple past is *ran*. Examples: *Today I run. Yesterday I ran. I have run every day this week.*

A common error is to use the simple past (*ran*) when the past participle (*run*) is called for. The form *ran* should never be used with the helping verbs *has*, *have*, or *had*. Other irregular verbs susceptible to the same kind of error with the past participle are *go*, *come*, *write*, *give*, and *eat*. The correct use of these verbs: *have gone*, *have come*, *have written*, *have given*, *have eaten*.

### 79. should have / should of

INCORRECT: I should of listened to my instincts.

CORRECT: I should have listened to my instincts.

The contraction *should've* combines the words *should* and *have*.

## 80. superlatives

**INCORRECT:** This movie is the most awesomest I've ever seen.

**CORRECT:** This movie is the most awesome I've ever seen.

Adjectives have three forms:

Positive: the adjective's "plain" form. Example: *awesome*.

Comparative: the form used to compare two things. Example: *more awesome*.

Superlative: the form used to compare more than two things. Example: *most awesome*.

Adjectives of one or two syllables usually form their comparisons by adding the endings *-er* and *-est*: *This is a fine story. This is a finer story than that one. This is the finest story of all. This is a simple solution. This is a simpler solution. This is the simplest solution of all.*

Adjectives of three or more syllables form their comparisons by preceding the adjective with *more* and *most*: *This is a beautiful flower. This is a more beautiful flower than that one. This is the most beautiful flower of all.*

The most common error in the use of the comparative forms is to use *more* and *most* in combination with *-er* and *-est* forms. Constructions like "the most awesomest" are often seen on the web. They may be meant to be humorous, but they come across as babyish.

**81. suppose to / supposed to**

INCORRECT: I'm suppose to wash the windows on Saturday.

CORRECT: I'm supposed to wash the windows on Saturday.

*Suppose* is a verb. Used with a helping verb it takes the past participle ending: -ed. The participle form in -ed can also be used as an adjective, as in the expression "an old-fashioned girl."

**82. \*toward / towards**

Towards may be more common among British speakers, but, used prepositionally, both are acceptable: *The child ran towards the road. The child ran toward the road.*

**83. went / gone**

INCORRECT: Fame had went to his head.

CORRECT: Fame had gone to his head.

The verb *go* has irregular past and past participle forms. The simple past is *went*. The past participle form is (had) *gone*. Never use *went* with *had*.

**84. who / whom**

INCORRECT: Whom shall I say is calling?

CORRECT: Who shall I say is calling?

*Whom* is the object form of *who*. Like *me*, *him*, *her*, *us*, and *them*, its correct grammatical use is to serve as the object of a verb or a preposition:

*Whom do you mean?* (direct object of the verb "do mean")

*To whom shall I give this puppy?* (object of the preposition "to")

*That is the man whom I saw running away.* (object of the verb "saw.")

Because so many speakers and writers of standard English have come to use *who* as both subject and object, it's not necessary to use *whom* at all. However, some speakers and writers mistakenly try to use *whom* as a subject. This is a nonstandard use to avoid.

The example given above is incorrect because the sentence is made up of two clauses: *I shall say* and *Who is calling*. As the subject of "is calling," *who* requires the subject form.

### 85. which / who

**INCORRECT:** That's the boy which started the fire.

**CORRECT:** That's the boy who started the fire.

The relative pronoun *which* stands for inanimate things only.

### 86. who / that

**INCORRECT:** The woman that sold you the car didn't own it.

**CORRECT:** The woman who sold you the car didn't own it.

Although many speakers and writers consider the words *who* and *that* be interchangeable, others prefer to reserve *who* for speaking of humans or humanized creatures, and *that* for referring to inanimate entities. Sometimes there are stylistic reasons to use *that* to stand for a person, but in general, use *who* when referring to people.

# PUNCTUATION MISTAKES

## 87. apostrophe to form plural

**INCORRECT:** King Alfred the Great lived in the 800's.

**CORRECT:** King Alfred the Great lived in the 800s.

The use of an apostrophe to form the plural of letters or numerals is to be avoided. The only time that it can be justified is with lower-case letters.

## 88. comma splice

**INCORRECT:** The fire truck tore around the corner, flames sputtered from the burning car.

**CORRECT:** The fire truck tore around the corner. Flames sputtered from the burning car.

A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses are joined by a comma.

## 89. comma missing after introductory clause

**INCORRECT:** If I were you I'd do what you have done.

**CORRECT:** If I were you, I'd do what you have done.

An adverbial clause that begins a sentence is set off by a comma: *When the rains came, everyone stayed inside.*



## 90. comma missing after introductory words/phrases

**INCORRECT:** To be perfectly honest I don't like her one bit.

**CORRECT:** To be perfectly honest, I don't like her one bit.

Single words and phrases that begin a sentence are set off by a comma: *Yes, you may go. In my opinion, James Fenimore Cooper is unjustly ignored.*

## 91. \* comma with lists

Disagreement exists as to whether or not a comma should be placed before the conjunctions *and*, *or*, or *nor* in a list.

*I like cats, dogs, birds, and moles.*

*I like cats, dogs, birds and moles.*

The first example illustrates the *serial comma*. Also called the *Oxford comma* and the *Harvard comma*, the serial comma is a comma placed before the conjunction.

Some usage guides, like the *Associated Press Stylebook*, recommend leaving out the last comma except in cases where confusion might arise because of another conjunction in the sentence: *I had orange juice, toast, and ham and eggs for breakfast.*

Using the serial comma consistently eliminates the necessity of making decisions on a case by case basis.

## 92. comma after main clause

**INCORRECT:** The King of Siam held absolute power over his subjects, when Anna Leonowens lived at his court.

**CORRECT:** The King of Siam held absolute power over his subjects when Anna Leonowens lived at his court.

When the adverbial clause follows the main clause, a comma is not usually needed.

## 93. comma instead of semi-colon

**INCORRECT:** We missed the bus, we did not know what to do.

**CORRECT:** We missed the bus; we did not know what to do.

Using a semi-colon to join closely-related main clauses is another means of avoiding a comma splice. If the clauses are very short, commas may be used: *He came, he saw, he conquered.*

## 94. dash instead of comma

**INCORRECT:** My best friend – Colin Blakely – is acting at the Old Vic.

**CORRECT:** My best friend, Colin Blakely, is acting at the Old Vic.

The em dash is frequently used unnecessarily to replace more appropriate punctuation marks. In the example above, the name is in apposition to the word "friend." Nouns in apposition are set off by commas.

## 95. multiple end marks

**INCORRECT:** We're going to Paris in April!!!! Do you want to go with us???

**CORRECT:** We're going to Paris in April! Do you want to go with us?

Multiple exclamation marks or question marks at the end of sentences are unnecessary and amateurish.

## 96. possessive apostrophe

**INCORRECT:** Mr. Thomas' opinion was that the dog should be returned.

**CORRECT:** Mr. Thomas's opinion was that the dog should be returned.

Nouns whose singular form does not end in *s* form the possessive by adding the apostrophe plus an *s* ('*s*): *Mary's veil. The house's roof. The trunk's latch.* Nouns that form their plurals by adding the letter *s* form the possessive by adding an apostrophe: *The birds' beaks. The teachers' salaries. The street lamps' bulbs.* A few nouns do not form the plural by adding *s*. Their possessive is formed by adding apostrophe *s* ('*s*): *The children's teacher. The deer's meadow. The salesmen's catalogs.*

Singular nouns that end in *s* also form the possessive by adding apostrophe *s* ('*s*): *St. James's Park. Arkansas's scenic beauty.*

Not all authorities agree that the addition of '*s* to a singular noun ending in *s* should be a hard and fast rule. For example, with ancient names ending in *s*, a conventional practice is to add only the apostrophe: *Jesus' name. Achilles' heel.*

Writers who prefer a one-rule-fits-all approach may simply follow the practice of forming the plural of any singular noun by adding 's.

### **97. \*punctuation outside or inside the quotation mark**

American usage places the period inside the quotation marks whether the quoted material includes a period or not.

Examples of American usage:

*Franklin Roosevelt said that the only thing Americans had to fear was "fear itself."*

*Winston Churchill said "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."*

British usage places periods that are not part of the quotation outside the closing quotation mark.

Examples of British Usage:

*Franklin Roosevelt said that the only thing Americans had to fear was "fear itself".*

*Winston Churchill said "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."*

### **98. quotation marks for emphasis**

**INCORRECT:** All “anoraks” are now on sale.

**CORRECT:** All anoraks are now on sale.

The chief use of quotation marks is to set off the exact words used by a speaker or by another writer: *“You can’t be serious,” Percy said. According to Dickens, the year 1775 was “the best of times” and “the worst of times.”*

An additional use of quotations marks is to indicate that the writer is using a word in an ironical sense: *Screaming at the top of her lungs, my “meek and mild” nanny sent the burglar running for his life.*

Using quotation marks to emphasize a word or phrase is unnecessary and confusing.

### 99. run-on sentence

**INCORRECT:** The fishing boat ran aground on a reef all the men were rescued.

**CORRECT:** The fishing boat ran aground on a reef. All the men were rescued.

A run-on sentence occurs when an independent clause follows another independent clause without punctuation or a joining word.

### 100. semi-colon instead of colon

**INCORRECT:** The winners are the following films; *The Lion King, Silas Marner, and Kim.*

**CORRECT:** The winners are the following films: *The Lion King, Silas Marner, and Kim.*

The most common use of a colon is to introduce a list following an independent clause.

The next most common use is to separate an example, explanation, or reason from a preceding independent clause:

*It's over between us: you won't stop drinking to excess.*

*I learned a useful mnemonic for remembering the colors of the rainbow: Roy G. Biv.*