

## Tips to help you improve your English grammar and word usage skills

- **Grammar** is a set of rules (subject-verb agreement, pronoun-antecedent agreement, etc.) that governs, or explains, how we use language. It also defines the types of words (nouns, verbs, etc.) and word groups (prepositional phrases, noun clauses, etc.) we use to make up sentences. A subset of grammar, **syntax** is the way we arrange words and phrases in sentences (e.g., the basic word order in English is subject-verb-object).
- **Word usage** refers to the correct and incorrect use of words and phrases in sentences (for example, *accept* vs. *except* and *its* vs. *it's*).
- Understanding and following principles of proper grammar and correct word usage, such as those presented in this guide, will help you to express your ideas more clearly and precisely, and to better comprehend the message others wish to convey.

## GRAMMAR PITFALLS

### SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

In sentences, **subjects** and **verbs** must agree in number—a singular verb takes a singular subject, and a plural verb takes a plural subject. Errors occur when it is unclear whether the subject is singular or plural. Consider the following:

- Compound subjects take a plural verb.  
**EXAMPLE:**  
My *coat* and my *hat are* in the closet.
- When compound subjects contain both a singular and a plural noun or pronoun joined by *or* or *nor*, the verb agrees with the subject closest to it.  
**EXAMPLES:**  
The *girls* or their *father prepares* breakfast on the weekends.  
Neither my *cousin* nor his *friends know* where the party is.
- Pronouns such as *each*, *either*, *everyone*, *everybody*, *neither*, *nobody*, and *someone* take a singular verb.  
**EXAMPLES:**  
*Each is expected* to pay his share.  
*Either works* well for me.  
*Someone is entering* the room.
- A phrase or clause can separate the subject from the verb. Disregard these elements (underlined in the sentences below) when deciding on a singular or plural verb.  
**EXAMPLES:**  
*One of the doors has been* left ajar.  
The *opera, including three intermissions, lasts* for four hours.  
All the *volunteers who arrived* for the training class *were* eager to begin.
- Sentences with the phrase *one of* take a singular or plural verb, depending on meaning.  
**EXAMPLES:**  
George is just *one of* the players who *have trained* hard this season.  
George is the only *one of* the players who *has trained* hard this season.  
**TIP:** Rephrasing sentences with *one of* helps you clarify the subject and choose the correct verb. The sentences above can be rephrased as follows, respectively: *Along with George, other players have trained hard this season. Of all the players, only George has trained hard this season.*
- Linking verbs (*be*, *seem*, *feel*, *appear*) agree with their subject, not their complement.  
**EXAMPLES:**  
Mia's favorite *snack seems* to be roasted peanuts.  
*Roasted peanuts are* Mia's favorite snack.
- Portion words (*percent*, *majority*, *fraction*, *all*, *some*, *none*) followed by a prepositional phrase with *of* take a singular or plural verb, depending on whether the object of the phrase is singular or plural.  
**EXAMPLES:**

Fifty percent of the *work is* done.

All of the *posters are* here.

**NOTE:** The prepositional phrase can be implied:

*There was a lot of news today, but only a fraction [of the news] was good. We ordered several books. None [of the books] have arrived.*

- Sums of money and periods of time always take a singular verb.  
**EXAMPLES:**  
*One hundred years* is a long time.  
*Forty dollars* is sufficient for now.
- Collective nouns (*audience*, *class*, *colony*, *committee*, *jury*, *team*) can be singular or plural, depending on their meaning in the sentence.  
**EXAMPLES:**  
The *team makes* an effort to win each game. (members act as a group)  
The *jury disagree* on the guilt of the accused. (members act as individuals)
- Some subjects look singular but are plural.  
**EXAMPLES:**  
The *data are* consistent with the findings of earlier studies.  
What *are the criteria* for membership in the club?  
**NOTE:** As demonstrated in the last sentence, verbs that come before their subject must also agree in number.  
**TIP:** *Data* (sing., *datum*) and *criteria* (sing., *criterion*) are of Latin and Greek derivation, respectively, and retain their original singular and plural forms.

### TENSE SHIFTS

- **Tense** is the form of a verb that indicates time. Unnecessary shifts in tense lead to confusion about when something is happening.  
**INCORRECT:** As Jean *was walking* down the street, her neighbor *had waved* to her.  
**CORRECT:** As Jean *was walking* down the street, her neighbor *was waving* (*waved*) to her.  
**INCORRECT:** When Julia *saw* the baby, she *gazes* into his eyes and *begins* to cry.  
**CORRECT:** When Julia *saw* the baby, she *gazed* into his eyes and *began* to cry.  
**NOTE:** As illustrated in the above sentences, *as* and *when* are often used to indicate that things are happening simultaneously or within the same time period.

### PRONOUN SHIFTS IN NUMBER OR PERSON

**Pronouns** are used to replace other words to simplify a sentence and avoid repetition. The word the pronoun replaces is called the **antecedent**. Confusion and errors occur when:

- more than one word could be the antecedent.

**UNCLEAR:** Hank sent Carl an email inquiring about *his* dog.

Does *his* refer to Hank or Carl?

**CLEAR:** Hank sent Carl an email inquiring about *Carl's* dog.

- the pronoun refers to an antecedent that is implied but not stated.  
**UNCLEAR:** The employees chose a date for the party, *which* all managers found acceptable. Does *which* refer to the employees choosing a date, or to the date itself?  
**CLEAR:** The employees chose a date for the party, a *date* all managers found acceptable.
- the pronoun does not agree with its antecedent.  
**INCORRECT:** Each employee was asked to submit their reports by Wednesday.  
**CORRECT:** Each employee was asked to submit his or her report by Wednesday.  
**CORRECT:** Employees were asked to submit their reports by Wednesday.  
**TIP:** Be alert to the use of *their* in sentences that contain *each* or *every*, as it is most likely an error to use *their* in such instances. (*each* and *every* are singular; *their* is plural)
- a shift is made from *one* to *you* or *I*.  
**INCORRECT:** When one studies for an exam, you should choose a quiet place.  
**CORRECT:** When one studies for an exam, he or she should choose a quiet place.

### RUN-ON SENTENCES

- A **run-on sentence** is two or more independent clauses that have no punctuation (**fused sentence**) or incorrect punctuation (**comma splice**).  
**EXAMPLES:**  
It was a windy day Mary flew her kite in the field. (fused)  
It was a windy day, Mary flew her kite in the field. (comma splice)
- Run-on sentences can be corrected in several ways:  
**EXAMPLES:**  
It was a windy day. Mary flew her kite in the field. (form two separate sentences)  
Because it was a windy day, Mary flew her kite in the field. (add a subordinating conjunction and comma at the end of the dependent clause)  
It was a windy day, and Mary flew her kite in the field. (add a comma and coordinating conjunction)  
It was a windy day; so, Mary flew her kite in the field. (add a semicolon and coordinating conjunction)

## SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

■ A **sentence fragment** is an incomplete sentence (lacking a subject or a verb) that is punctuated as if it were complete.

**FRAGMENT:** Built a huge swimming pool in the backyard. (no subject)

**SENTENCE:** Our neighbors built a huge swimming pool in the backyard.

**FRAGMENT:** The newly-elected Congressman in our district. (no verb)

**SENTENCE:** The newly-elected Congressman in our district voted in favor of the bill.

■ Sentence fragments often begin with a subordinating conjunction that introduces a dependent clause that has become disconnected from the main clause.

**FRAGMENT:** We went to bed immediately. Because it was midnight when we arrived.

**SENTENCE:** We went to bed immediately because it was midnight when we arrived.

**NOTE:** Sentence fragments should always be avoided in formal writing. However, they are acceptable in literary work. For example, *The clock struck twelve. Nothing. The clock struck one. Still nothing. Why hadn't she called?*

## COMMAS

Commas are often omitted, overused, or used incorrectly. Consider the following:

■ Commas are used to set off:

- introductory words, phrases, and clauses.

– adverbs

**EXAMPLES:**

Frankly, the film was highly overrated and boring. First, you need to write a draft of the letter.

– transitional phrases

**EXAMPLES:**

Nevertheless, you still need to complete and sign the form.

Furthermore, her argument is more logical than yours.

– signal phrases for quotations

**EXAMPLES:**

Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself."

"No," cried Dan, "I will not change my mind."

– prepositional phrases

**EXAMPLES:**

After preparing the lengthy report, John left for home.

During the winter, we spend more time indoors.

– subordinate clauses

**EXAMPLES:**

When Heloise speaks, everyone listens.

Because we had extra time, we stopped to visit Aunt Jean.

- nonrestrictive clauses (not essential to the basic meaning of the sentence).

**EXAMPLES:**

Jake, who is my cousin, wrote that article.

Those earrings, which you bought last week, are beautiful.

- items in a series of words, phrases, or clauses.

**EXAMPLES:**

We sang, danced, and ate heartily at the party.

Roy rode up the hill, through the park, and around the lake.

Nancy made the cake, Sue decorated it, and we all enjoyed it!

**TIP:** Use semicolons when commas might cause

confusion. For example, *At twenty-three Meg left Bridgeport, the city where she was born and raised; moved to Rome, the city of her dreams; and spent the next twenty years working for the Italian Red Cross.*

- independent clauses in compound sentences joined by *and*, *but*, *so*, *yet*, *or*, *nor*, *for*.

**EXAMPLES:**

Sue wrote the story, and Tom edited it.

We could have stayed longer, but we decided it was best to leave.

■ Commas should *not* be used with:

- compound structures.

**INCORRECT:** Melinda, and her sister will attend the ceremony.

**CORRECT:** Melinda and her sister will attend the ceremony.

**INCORRECT:** Ana will sing, and dance at the event.

**CORRECT:** Ana will sing and dance at the event.

- restrictive elements (elements essential to the basic meaning of a sentence).

**INCORRECT:** People, who fail to recycle, do not help the environment.

**CORRECT:** People who fail to recycle do not help the environment.

- two independent clauses that should be joined by a conjunction (comma splice).

**INCORRECT:** We walked into town yesterday, we were tired.

**CORRECT:** We walked into town yesterday. We were tired.

**CORRECT:** Because we walked into town yesterday, we were tired.

**CORRECT:** We walked into town yesterday, and we were tired.

**CORRECT:** We walked into town yesterday; so, we were tired.

## APOSTROPHES

■ The **apostrophe**, which is often misused or overused, has two basic functions: to show the omission of letters in **contractions** and to indicate **possession**.

■ In **contractions**, the apostrophe replaces the omitted letter.

**EXAMPLES:**

*It's* snowing today. (It is)

*He's* a great leader. (He is)

You know the answer, *don't* you? (do not)

■ To indicate **possession**, add an apostrophe and an *s* (*'s*):

- to singular nouns, acronyms, and indefinite pronouns (even if they end in *s*).

**EXAMPLES:**

the girl's book

NATO's members

someone's hat

Charles's car

**NOTE:** A simple apostrophe is also acceptable in the last example: *Charles' car*.

- to plural nouns that do not end in *s*.

**EXAMPLES:**

the women's club

the children's songs

- when the noun that should follow is implied.

**EXAMPLE:**

This is her mother's, not her jacket.

- to the end of singular and plural compound nouns.

**EXAMPLES:**

my brother-in-law's book  
my two brothers-in-law's books

- to the last noun to indicate joint ownership.

**EXAMPLE:**

Cristina and Giulia's bedroom is blue. (They share a bedroom.)

- to the end of all nouns to indicate individual ownership.

**EXAMPLE:**

Jim's, Judy's, and Mark's bikes were new. (They each have a bike.)

■ Add a simple apostrophe (*'*):

- to plural nouns that end in *s*.

**EXAMPLES:**

two girls' books

four teachers' classes

**NOTE:** The most common apostrophe errors occur with *its* and *it's* and *whose* and *who's*. The possessive forms of *it* and *who* (*its* and *whose*) do not use an apostrophe, while the verb contractions (*it's* and *who's*) do.

## DOUBLE NEGATIVES

■ A **double negative** is not appropriate in formal writing. Often the error can be corrected by deleting one of the negatives.

**INCORRECT:** We do *not* have *no* time to finish the report.

**CORRECT:** We have *no* time to finish the report.

**CORRECT:** We do *not* have time to finish the report.

■ Words such as *scarcely*, *hardly*, and *barely* are considered negatives and should not be used with other negatives.

**INCORRECT:** I *hardly* have *no* money.

**CORRECT:** I *hardly* have *any* money.

**CORRECT:** I practically have *no* money.

## MISUSED MODIFIERS

**Modifiers** are adjectives, adverbs, phrases, or clauses that modify or describe other words in a sentence. Modifiers need to be placed as close as possible to the words they modify or describe.

■ A **misplaced modifier** can easily confuse readers by seeming to modify some other element in the sentence.

**INCORRECT:** The hikers saw the eagles swooping and diving with binoculars.

Who was wearing the binoculars, the eagles?

**CORRECT:** With binoculars, the hikers saw the eagles swooping and diving.

■ To avoid ambiguity, the **adverb** *only* should be placed as close as possible to the word it modifies in a sentence.

**SENTENCE 1:** The band *only* sang five songs at the concert.

**SENTENCE 2:** The band sang *only* five songs at the concert.

**EXPLANATION:** Sentence 1 suggests that the band *sang*, rather than *played*, five songs. Sentence 2 suggests that the band sang *five*, as opposed to *six*, *seven*, or *other* number of songs.

■ A **dangling modifier** appears at the beginning or end of a sentence and is intended to modify something that is not always explicitly stated. A dangling modifier can make it difficult or impossible to clearly understand a message.

**INCORRECT:** As a young boy, my father taught me how to swim.

Who was a young boy—the father or the author of the sentence?

## QuickStudy

### REDUNDANCY

**Redundancy**, meaning “repetition,” should be avoided in formal writing. The following chart presents examples of common redundant phrases.

REDUNDANT PHRASES	REVISION	REASON
12 o'clock noon/midnight	noon/ midnight	<i>Noon/midnight</i> always occur at 12:00.
2:00 p.m. in the afternoon	2:00 p.m.	<i>p.m.</i> means “in the afternoon.”
absolutely essential	essential	Something is either essential or not.
added bonus	bonus	<i>Bonus</i> implies something added.
advance warning	warning	A warning is always given in advance.
and etc.	etc.	<i>And</i> is included in <i>etc.</i> , which means “and so forth.”
ATM machine	ATM	The <i>M</i> in <i>ATM</i> stands for machine.
complete opposite	opposite	Things cannot be partially opposite.
completely surrounded	surrounded	<i>Surrounded</i> implies being enclosed on all sides.
consensus of opinion	consensus	<i>Consensus</i> means a general agreement of opinion.
estimated at approximately	estimated	<i>Estimated</i> is an approximate guess.
forward progress	progress	<i>Progress</i> implies moving forward.
free gift	gift	A gift is free.
HIV virus	HIV	The <i>V</i> in <i>HIV</i> stands for virus.
IRA account	IRA	The <i>A</i> in <i>IRA</i> stands for account.
ISBN number	ISBN	The <i>N</i> in <i>ISBN</i> stands for number.
new breakthrough	breakthrough	<i>Breakthrough</i> implies novelty, or something new.
past history	history	All history is past.
PC computer	PC	The <i>C</i> in <i>PC</i> stands for computer.
PIN number	PIN	The <i>N</i> in <i>PIN</i> stands for number.
RAM memory	RAM	The <i>M</i> in <i>RAM</i> stands for memory.
raze to the ground	raze	<i>Raze</i> means to level something to the ground.
reason why	reason that	<i>Why</i> refers to reason.
revert back	revert	<i>Revert</i> means to go back.
round in shape	round	<i>Round</i> refers to shape.
same exact	exact	<i>Same</i> and <i>exact</i> are synonyms.
SAT test	SAT	The <i>T</i> in <i>SAT</i> stands for test.
scattered in all directions	scattered	<i>Scattered</i> means dispersed in all directions.
unexpected surprise	surprise	A surprise is always unexpected.

**CORRECT:** When I was a young boy, my father taught me how to swim.

• Be aware that some dangling modifiers are not easy to detect.  
**INCORRECT:** Thinking about the exam, my nerves got shattered.

Were your nerves thinking about the exam?

**CORRECT:** Thinking about the exam, I got nervous.

■ **Unique** is an **absolute modifier** meaning “one of a kind.” Comparatives, superlatives, and words like *very*, *so*, or *extremely* should not be used to modify it.

**INCORRECT:** Her new piano has a very unique sound.

**CORRECT:** Her new piano has a unique sound.

**NOTE:** Often a similar word can be used in place of an absolute word. In those instances, a modifier is appropriate.

**INCORRECT:** This piano has a more unique sound than that one.

**CORRECT:** This piano has a more distinctive sound than that one.

COMMON ABSOLUTE WORDS		
dead	finite	mortal
entirely	identical	opposite
eternal	immortal	perfect
fatal	infinite	right
final	irrevocable	straight

### SPLIT INFINITIVES

A **split infinitive** occurs when a word (usually an adverb) comes between *to* and the verb in the infinitive.

**INCORRECT:** She wanted *to quickly go* to the gym.

**CORRECT:** She wanted *to go quickly* to the gym.

**NOTE:** Split infinitives should always be avoided in formal writing. However, because they have become part of everyday speech, fiction writers often use them in dialogue (conversation between characters in a play or narrative) in order to make their characters seem more like real people.

### OTHER COMMON GRAMMAR MISTAKES

**a/an** – Use *a* before consonant sounds and *an* before vowel sounds.

**EXAMPLES:**

*a* large hole

*a* hollow sound

*an* army of three

*an* honorable man

**different from/different than** – *Different from* is used with simple comparisons, as in comparing two persons or things. *Different than* can be used instead of *different from* when the words following it make up a clause.

**EXAMPLES:**

Spain is quite *different from* France.

The play was *different than* what I had expected.

**NOTE:** In the second example, *different from* could also be used.

**i.e./e.g.** – The abbreviation *i.e.* is *id est*, meaning “that is” or “in other words.” The abbreviation *e.g.* is *exempli gratia*, meaning “for example.” A comma follows both.

**EXAMPLES:**

The judge sentenced him to the maximum allowed under the law, *i.e.*, ten years.

We need to find a quiet place to study, *e.g.*, the library.

**me vs. I** – Choosing between *me* and *I* is difficult when the words are used with other nouns or pronouns.

**INCORRECT:** It was *me* who sent that message.

**CORRECT:** It was *I* who sent that message.

**TIP:** When choosing between *me* or *I*, it is helpful to simplify the sentence, use both words, and choose the one that makes sense. “*Me* sent the message, *I* sent the message.” The correct choice is *I*.

**INCORRECT:** Daisy gave the package to Marcy and *I*.

**CORRECT:** Daisy gave the package to Marcy and *me*.

**TIP:** When talking about yourself and another person, take the other person out of the sentence and decide whether *I* or *me* makes sense. “Daisy gave the package to *me*, Daisy gave the package to *I*.” The correct choice is *me*.

**nonplussed** – *Nonplussed* is an adjective that means “perplexed or bewildered.”

**EXAMPLE:**

She was frequently *nonplussed* by the confusion surrounding her.

**NOTE:** Be careful not to attribute the opposite meaning to *nonplussed*, as the word is commonly thought to mean “calm, unperturbed, or unruffled.”

**penultimate** – Meaning “next to last,” *penultimate* is often mistakenly used to mean the very last, or the ultimate.

**EXAMPLE:**

The stress in Spanish words often falls on the *penultimate* syllable.

**who vs. whom (whoever vs. whomever)** – It depends on whether it is the subject or object. *Who/whoever* is used when referring to the subject of a clause or phrase; *whom/whomever*, when referring to the object of a clause or phrase.

**INCORRECT:** Dr. Vargas is the scientist whom wrote the paper.

**CORRECT:** Dr. Vargas is the scientist who wrote the paper. (subject of verb *wrote*)

**TIP:** To choose between *who* or *whom* in a relative clause, divide the statement into two sentences and replace *who* or *whom* with a subject and object pronoun. “Dr. Vargas is the scientist.” *He* wrote the paper. *Him* wrote the paper. The subject pronoun *he* makes sense, so the correct choice is *who*.

**INCORRECT:** For who was the song written?

**CORRECT:** For whom was the song written? (object of preposition *for*)

**TIP:** To choose between *who* or *whom* in a question, answer the question with a subject or object pronoun to see which makes sense. “The song was written for *she*.” “The song was written for *her*.” The object pronoun *her* makes sense, so the correct choice is *whom*.

**INCORRECT:** We must speak respectfully to whoever we meet.

**CORRECT:** We must speak respectfully to whomever we meet. (object of verb *meet*)

**COMMON VERB FORM PITFALLS**

Many verbs have irregular past participle forms. Below is a list of some of the verbs that cause the most confusion. Consult a dictionary for other verbs and verb parts not listed here.

**Irregular Verb Forms**

Base Form	Present 3rd Person	Present Participle	Past 3rd Person	Past Participle
alight	alights	alighting	alighted/alit	alighted/alit
arise	arises	arising	arose	arisen
awake	awakes	awaking	awoke/awaked	awoken/awaked
bear	bears	bearing	bore	born/borne
behold	beholds	beholding	beheld	beheld
bid (farewell)	bids	bidding	bid/bade	bidden/bid
bind	binds	binding	bound	bound
bite	bites	biting	bit	bitten
blow	blows	blowing	blew	blown
broadcast	broadcasts	broadcasting	broadcast/broadcasted	broadcast/broadcasted
burn	burns	burning	burned/burnt	burned/burnt
burst	bursts	bursting	burst	burst
choose	chooses	choosing	chose	chosen
creep	creeps	creeping	crept	crept
deal	deals	dealing	dealt	dealt
dive	dives	diving	dived/dove	dived
dream	dreams	dreaming	dreamed/dreamt	dreamed/dreamt
drink	drinks	drinking	drank	drunk/drank
forbid	forbids	forbidding	forbade	forbidden
forsake	forsakes	forsaking	forsook	forsaken
hang	hangs	hanging	hung/hanged	hung/hanged
inlay	inlays	inlaying	inlaid	inlaid
input	inputs	inputting	input/inputted	input/inputted
interweave	interweaves	interweaving	interwove/interweaved	interwoven/interweaved
kneel	kneels	kneeling	kneeled/knelt	kneeled/knelt
lay (place)	lays	laying	laid	laid

Base Form	Present 3rd Person	Present Participle	Past 3rd Person	Past Participle
leap	leaps	leaping	leaped/leapt	leaped/leapt
learn	learns	learning	learned/learnt	learned/learnt
lie (recline)	lies	lying	lay	lain
loosen	loosens	loosening	loosened	loosened
lose	loses	losing	lost	lost
mistake	mistakes	mistaking	mistook	mistaken
override	overrides	overriding	overrode	overridden
plead	pleads	pleading	pleaded/pled	pleaded/pled
prove	proves	proving	proved	proven/proved
rid	rids	riding	rid/ridded	rid/ridded
rise	rises	rising	rose	risen
shake	shakes	shaking	shook	shaken
shear	shears	shearing	sheared	shorn/sheared
shine	shines	shining	shined/shone	shined/shone
shrink	shrinks	shrinking	shrank/shrunk	shrunk/shrunken
sink	sinks	sinking	sank/sunk	sunk
slay	slays	slaying	slew/slayed	slain
sneak	sneaks	sneaking	sneaked/snuck	sneaked/snuck
spoil	spoils	spoiling	spoiled/spoilt	spoiled/spoilt
sting	stings	stinging	stung	stung
stink	stinks	stinking	stank/stunk	stunk
strew	strews	strewing	strewed	strewed/strewn
strive	strives	striving	strived/strove	strived/striven
sublet	sublets	subletting	sublet	sublet
swear	swears	swearing	swore	sworn
swim	swims	swimming	swam	swum
tread	treads	treading	trod/treaded	trodden
weep	weeps	weeping	wept	wept

**USAGE PITFALLS**

**COMMONLY MISUSED WORDS**

It is important to choose the proper words when you express yourself so that your message is easily and correctly understood. Misused words can involve mixing up words that sound alike, using a word with the wrong shade of meaning, or using a word with a completely wrong meaning. Following is a list of easily confused words.

**accept/except:** *Accept* means "to take willingly." *Except* means "to leave out." *Except* can also be a preposition meaning "but."  
I *accepted* her advice.  
Dan invited all his friends, but *excepted* Tim.  
Everyone sang *except* Sue.

**acute/chronic:** *Acute* means "extremely sharp or severe." *Chronic* means "long-lasting or recurrent."  
Jen called the doctor when she experienced *acute* pain in her neck.  
Lupus is a *chronic* condition that people live with for the rest of their lives.

**adapt/adopt:** *Adapt* means "to change." *Adopt* means "to take as one's own."  
We *adapted* immediately to the warm, sunny climate!  
Susan *adopted* a stray cat.

**adverse/averse:** *Adverse* means "unfavorable, contrary, or hostile." *Averse* means "having a strong feeling of opposition, antipathy, or repugnance."

The plane took off despite the *adverse* weather conditions.  
Luke is *averse* to studying, which explains why he fails all his tests.

**affect/effect:** *Affect* is usually a verb meaning "to influence." *Effect* is usually a noun meaning "result or outcome." *Effect* can also be used as a verb meaning "to cause to happen or to bring about."  
Drew's ability to *affect* people ensures his success as a doctor.  
One *effect* of the storm was a three-day power outage.  
Only the principal can *effect* major changes to school policy.

**afterward/afterword:** *Afterward* is an adverb meaning "at a later time, subsequently."  
*Afterword* is an epilogue (passage) added at the end of a book.  
First we went to the recital and *afterward* to the restaurant.  
The author explained the symbolism of each character in the *afterword*.

**aggravate/irritate:** *Aggravate* means "to make worse." *Irritate* means "to annoy" or "to cause minor pain."  
Her abrasive words *aggravated* the situation.  
His constant teasing *irritated* me.  
The salt water *irritated* my eyes.

**aide/aid:** *Aide* generally refers to a personal

assistant; whereas *aid* refers to an inanimate object.  
The kind, sympathetic *aide* cared for the sick woman.  
We will provide as much *aid* as possible.

**all ready/already:** *All ready* means "completely prepared." *Already* means "previously."  
The packages are *all ready* to be shipped.  
We sent three packages *already*.

**all together/altogether:** *All together* means "in a group." *Altogether* means "completely."  
We went *all together* to the beach.  
It was an *altogether* crazy idea.

**allude/refer:** To *allude* is to suggest without naming. To *refer* is to speak of directly.  
Lou *alluded* to his parents when he spoke about positive role models.  
Pat *referred* to her own experience with the product to highlight its usefulness.

**allusion/illusion:** An *allusion* is an indirect reference to something. An *illusion* is a misconception or false impression.  
Our instructor made several *allusions* to Hemingway's works.  
The mirage in the desert is an *illusion*.

**alternate/alternative:** As nouns, *alternate* means "a substitute or second" or "every other in a series," and *alternative* refers to or implies a choice between two things. As adverbs,

## COMMONLY MISUSED WORDS cont.

*alternately* means "in turn, one after another," and *alternatively* means "on the other hand."

The jury *alternate* was not called on to vote. (noun)

If the flight is grounded, an *alternative* would be to go by train. (noun)

Pam and I drove *alternately* so neither of us would get tired. (adverb)

We might go to a movie or, *alternatively*, to the theater. (adverb)

**NOTE:** *Alternate*, with the stress on the last syllable, can be a verb. It is related to the adjective and means "to go back and forth" or "to change from one state to another and back again repeatedly." For example, "*Alternate* the colors so that no two are next to each other."

**anxious/eager:** *Anxious* means "uneasy or apprehensive." *Eager* means "enthusiastic."

Lucy is *anxious* about the upcoming exam.

I am *eager* to meet my new grandson.

**apart/a part:** *Apart* is normally used as an adverb. It can be used as a preposition when joined with the word *from*. *A part* is two words, the article plus a noun.

The shed blew *apart* in the storm. (adverb)

I saw no one *apart* from you. (preposition)

The motor is missing a *part* of the flywheel. (noun)

**appraise/apprise:** *Appraise* means "to assess or value something." *Apprise* means "to teach or inform."

His performance was *appraised* positively.

I lost no time in *apprising* her of the situation.

**aural/oral:** *Aural* refers to the ears and hearing. *Oral* refers to the mouth and speaking.

The tape used for the *aural* exam was defective; no one could understand it.

The dentist performed a thorough *oral* exam and found nothing of concern.

**awhile/a while:** *Awhile* is an adverb which means "for some time." *A while* is two words, the article plus a noun, and is usually used after the preposition *for*.

I thought *awhile* before I answered.

I thought for *a while* before I answered.

**bad/badly:** *Bad* is an adjective that is often used with linking verbs such as *look*, *feel*, *sound*, or *be*. *Badly* is an adverb that describes verbs. As many adverbs do, *badly* answers the question "How?"

She felt *bad* about missing the concert.

The team played *badly* last night and lost the game.

**beside/besides:** *Beside* is an adverb that means "next to." *Besides* is a preposition that means "in addition to."

I sat *beside* Lena at the game.

*Besides* sugar, what else do you need?

**between/among:** *Between* is used with two people or things. *Among* is used with three or more people or things.

She had to choose *between* the blue and the green hat.

We divided the pie *among* the three of us.

**can/may:** *Can*, as an auxiliary verb, means "to be able to." *May*, as an auxiliary verb, means "to be permitted to."

Marsha *can* swim faster than anyone I know.

*May* I have the butter, please?

**capital/capitol:** *Capital* refers to a city and *capitol* to a building where lawmakers meet. *Capital* also refers to wealth or resources.

The *capital* of Pennsylvania is Harrisburg.

Traffic was at a standstill around the *capitol*.

Without sufficient *capital*, a company cannot grow.

**cite/site/sight:** *Cite* is a verb that means "to quote as an authority or example," or "to recognize formally." *Site* is a noun that refers to a location; *sight* is a noun that refers to something that is seen.

I *cited* several scholars in my study of water resources.

The mayor was *cited* for his service to the city.

They chose a new *site* for the factory just outside of town.

The *sight* of the glaciers left me feeling cold!

**climactic/climatic:** *Climactic* comes from *climax*, the point of greatest intensity in a series of events. *Climatic* comes from *climate* and refers to meteorological conditions.

My cell phone rang at the *climactic* moment of the film.

Before visiting a city, one should become familiar with its *climatic* conditions.

**complement/compliment:** *Complement* refers to something that completes or goes well with. *Compliment* refers to praise or flattery. Both words can be used as nouns or verbs.

That scarf is a perfect *complement* to your outfit.

We sent our *compliments* to the chef for the delicious meal.

**concurrent/consecutive:** *Concurrent* means "simultaneous or happening at the same time as something else." *Consecutive* means "successive, or following one after the other."

Your arrival was *concurrent* with his departure.

Can you name the months in French in *consecutive* order?

**connote/denote:** *Connote* means "to imply or suggest." *Denote* means "to indicate or refer to specifically."

Your letter *connotes* a certain arrogance.

In his speech, the President *denoted* his intention to improve public education.

**continually/continuously:** *Continually* means "frequently recurring or intermittent." *Continuously* means "occurring without interruption."

Her friends *continually* urge her to spend time in Europe with them.

My roommate plays his stereo *continuously* from morning until night.

**convince/persuade:** Generally speaking, one *convinces* a person that something is true but *persuades* a person to do something.

Now that I see my good grades, I am *convinced* that my parents were right to *persuade* me to play less and study more.

**council/counsel:** A *council* is an assembly of legislators, advisors, or administrators. *Counsel* is advice. The word can also be used as a verb. The *council* met yesterday to decide on the housing project.

Did you receive sufficient *counsel* on the matter?

The lawyer *counseled* his client.

**credible/credulous:** *Credible* means "believable." *Credulous* means "gullible."

The salesman came across as highly *credible*.

Do not be *credulous* and fall for the scheme.

**definite/definitive:** *Definite* means "clear, precise, known with exactness." *Definitive* means "explicit, sharply defining, or conclusive."

There is a *definite* need for action.

The judge's decision was *definitive*.

**discreet/discrete:** *Discreet* means "prudent, circumspect, or modest." *Discrete* means "separate or individually distinct."

Her *discreet* handling of the situation put everyone at ease.

Each department operates as a *discrete* entity.

**disinterested/uninterested:** *Disinterested* means "unbiased or impartial." *Uninterested* means "not interested or indifferent."

She appealed to her *disinterested* friends to help mediate the situation.

They remained *uninterested* in our business offer.

**economic/economical:** *Economic* refers to the economy. *Economical* means "financially prudent, frugal."

The president has many important *economic* decisions to make.

Buying items on sale is an *economical* way to shop.

**elicit/illicit:** *Elicit* is a verb that means "to bring forth, to evoke." *Illicit* is an adjective that means "unlawful."

The teacher finally *elicited* the correct response.

The criminal engaged in *illicit* drug trafficking for several years.

**emigrate/immigrate:** *Emigrate* means "to leave one's native country to settle in another." *Immigrate* means "to enter another country and reside there."

My grandparents *emigrated* from Italy in the late 1800s.

Many Salvadorans *immigrated* to the United States to find work.

**TIP:** Both words can be used as nouns—*emigrant*, *immigrant*. Remember that *emigrants* emigrate from a country and that *immigrants* immigrate to a country.

**exacerbate/exasperate:** *Exacerbate* means "to make worse." *Exasperate* means "to exhaust (usually someone's patience)."

Her unkind remarks *exacerbated* the already tense situation.

I was *exasperated* by his repeated denial of guilt.

**farther/further:** *Farther* refers to physical distance. *Further* refers to extent or degree.

London is *farther* north than Juneau.

This plan requires *further* study.

**fewer/less:** *Fewer* is used with count nouns (nouns that can be counted one-by-one); *less* is used with mass nouns (nouns that cannot be individually counted).

This company has *fewer* employees than that one.

I spent *less* time at the museum than she did.

**NOTE:** When referring to time or money, *less* is usually used even with numbers. (*I have less than two hours to shop, and less than twenty dollars to do so.*) Specific units of time or money use *fewer* only in cases where individual items are referred to. (*She has fewer quarters than pennies.*)

**figuratively/literally:** *Figuratively* means "metaphorically or symbolically." *Literally* means "truly or actually." It also means "according to the exact meaning of the words."

At the sight of the shadowy figure, she *figuratively* jumped out of her skin.

When I heard the baby's cries, I *literally* ran up the stairs as fast as I could.

Do you want me to translate the passage *literally*?

**flounder/founder:** *Flounder* means "to struggle." *Founder* means "to sink or fail."

Why does she *flounder* so before making a decision?

The ship hit an iceberg and may *founder*.

**foreword/forward:** *Foreword* is a noun that refers to an introductory note or preface. *Forward* is an adjective or adverb that means "toward the front." *Forward* is also a verb that means "to send on."

The author explained in the *foreword* her reasons for writing the book.

We have seats in the *forward* section of the concert hall.

I will ask the Post Office to *forward* all mail to our new address.

## COMMONLY MISUSED WORDS cont.

**good/well:** *Good* is an adjective meaning “acceptable or average.” It is never used as an adverb. *Well* is an adverb of manner that can also be used as an adjective to describe a state of health.

John is a *good* swimmer.

Today he swam exceedingly *well*.

Lynn did not feel *well* this morning.

**historic/historical:** *Historic* refers to an important event in history. *Historical* describes something that happened in the past, whether it was important or not.

The leaders of the two countries met in what became an *historic* event.

Her work involves assessment of *historical* structures.

**imply/infer:** To *imply* is to hint at something. To *infer* is to conclude or surmise from evidence or circumstances.

He *implied* that he would not attend the party when he mentioned how tired he was.

We *inferred* that she was a good woman based on her kind actions.

**it's/its:** *It's* is a contraction for *it is* or *it has*. *Its* is a possessive adjective.

*It's* time to eat!

*It's* been nice getting to know you.

The rose lost all *its* petals.

**TIP:** Choose between *it's* or *its* by repeating the sentence aloud using *it is* or *it has*. If the sentence makes sense with one of these expressions, *it's* is correct. Use the same strategy for all word sets that include a contraction, such as *their/there/they're*; *whosel/who's*; *won't/wont*; *your/you're*.

**lend/loan/borrow:** *Lend* is a verb that means “to temporarily give something to someone.” *Loan* is a noun meaning “something borrowed.” *Borrow* means “to receive something from someone temporarily.”

Please *lend* us a hundred dollars.

When do we need to repay the *loan*?

Can I *borrow* five dollars until tomorrow?

**lie/lay:** *Lie* is an intransitive verb (does not take an object) that means “to recline.” *Lay* is a transitive verb (takes an object) that means “to put something down in a certain place.”

Because she didn't feel well, Betsy decided to *lie* down.

*Lay* the glass carefully on the table.

**NOTE:** *Lie* and *lay* cause confusion in their past tenses. The past of *lie* is *lay*. (Last night I *lay* awake in bed.) The past of *lay* is *laid*. (He *laid* the package down.) The past participle of *lie* is *lain*. (The cat has *lain* on the sofa all day.) The past participle of *lay* is *laid*. (Have you *laid* the book on the table?)

**lightening/lightning:** *Lightening* is a verb that means “to reduce the weight.” *Lightning* is a noun that refers to the electrical discharge in the sky.

I am *lightening* my workload these days.

A bolt of *lightning* struck the tree.

**like/as:** *Like* is a preposition; *as* is a conjunction that is followed by a verb.

Penelope hops *like* a kangaroo.

Jo writes well, *as* do all the students in Mr. Kent's class.

**loathe/loathe:** *Loathe* is an adjective that means “reluctant.” *Loathe* is a verb meaning “to hate or detest.”

He was *loath* to criticize her work for fear of reprisal.

I *loathe* discrimination of any kind.

**loose/lose:** *Loose* is an adjective that means “not tight.” *Lose* is a verb that means “to fail to win” or “to misplace.”

Jake's trousers are too *loose* to be worn without a belt. The team cannot afford to *lose* another game.

Please try not to *lose* your keys again.

**luxuriant/luxurious:** *Luxuriant* refers to thick or abundant growth. *Luxurious* refers to wealth and comfort.

The house had a *luxuriant* tropical garden.

We stayed in a *luxurious* hotel.

**more than/over:** Use *more than* when you mean in excess of; use *over* when referring to physical placement of an object.

*More than* 250 students participated in the rally.

The eagles flew *over* the mountain.

**nauseated/nauseous:** *Nauseated* means “feeling sick in the stomach or disgusted.” *Nauseous* means “causing one to feel sick in the stomach or disgusted.”

I was *nauseated* for nearly the entire day.

The storm made the cruise a *nauseous* experience.

**number/amount:** Use *number* with quantities that can be counted one-by-one and *amount* with quantities that cannot be counted.

A large *number* of oranges were left.

There was a small *amount* of juice in the container.

**passed/past:** *Passed* is the past tense and past participle of *pass*. *Past* is an adjective that refers to time gone by. It is also a preposition meaning “beyond.”

We *passed* the house many times.

Many changes took place in the *past* decade.

She walked *past* me without saying a word.

**precede/proceed:** *Precede* means “to come before.” *Proceed* means “to move forward.”

He *preceded* me into the room.

When I caught up with him, I *proceeded* to tell him off.

**premier/premiere:** As an adjective, *premier* means “first in rank or importance.” As a noun, *premier* refers to the head of state. The noun *premiere* refers to a first performance.

It was a *premier* idea.

The nation's new *premier* is a strong leader.

We attended the film's *premiere*.

**prescribe/proscribe:** *Prescribe* means “to command or recommend something.” *Proscribe* means “to outlaw something.”

The doctor *prescribed* antibiotics to treat her symptoms.

In some states, talking on the phone while driving has been *proscribed*.

**principal/principle:** As a noun, *principal* is a person who holds a position of importance, or a sum of money. As an adjective, it means “main or most important.” *Principle* is a noun that means “a basic truth or law.”

Our school *principal* has more than fifteen years of experience in education.

A portion of the payment applies to the *principal* of the loan.

One of the *principal* ingredients in paella is saffron.

Children learn many important life *principles* in school.

**rebut/refute:** *Rebut* means “to argue to the contrary.” *Refute* implies winning the argument.

While I argued in favor of changing the law, my husband *rebutted*.

Mary *refuted* the speeding ticket the officer gave her.

**stationary/stationery:** *Stationary* refers to something that is fixed or unmoving. *Stationery* refers to writing materials.

They swerved to avoid the *stationary* object in the road.

I printed the letter on company *stationery*.

**than/then:** *Than* is a conjunction used to compare things. *Then* is an adverb that means “at that time,” “next in order,” “in that case.”

This table is much sturdier *than* that one.

He was not here *then*.

First, we'll make our list; *then*, we'll go to the store.

If it's sunny, *then* we'll go to the beach.

**that/which:** *That* begins restrictive clauses that single out something. *Which* begins nonrestrictive clauses that provide nonessential information to the sentence.

The last song *that* Phil sang is my favorite.

The last song, *which* Phil sang, is my favorite.

**TIP:** Commas mark the beginning of nonrestrictive clauses.

**their/there/they're:** *Their* is a possessive adjective. *There* is an adverb that specifies a place. *They're* is a contraction for *they are*.

Jane and June finally finished *their* project.

The book is *there* on the table.

*They're* planning to arrive at 6:00 p.m.

**to/too/two:** *To* is a preposition meaning “in the direction of, toward, in contact with, for the purpose of, or to the extent of.” *Too* is an adverb meaning “in addition, more than enough, as well.” *Two* is a number.

Alicia had twenty-*two* books, which were *too* many to read in one week.

**tortuous/torturous:** *Tortuous* refers to something that is complex or marked by turns, bends, or curves. *Torturous* refers to severe pain or anguish.

Driving up the *tortuous* mountain road was scary. The loud music gave me a *torturous* headache.

**whether/if:** Use *whether* to express alternatives. Use *if* to express a condition.

She must decide *whether* to go to the beach or to the mountains.

*If* it rains, she will go to the mountains.

**whose/who's:** *Whose* is an interrogative word or a relative pronoun. *Who's* is a contraction for *who is* and *who has*.

*Whose* book is this?

Jennifer is the girl *who's* playing the piano.

Mrs. Ramsay is the woman *who's* been sending the generous donations.

**won't/wont:** *Won't* is a contraction for *will not*. *Wont* means “accustomed or used” (as an adjective) or “habit or custom” (as a noun).

He *won't* let me drive his car because it's new.

He spent the morning reading, as he was *wont* to do.

Lucille vacationed at the beach as was her *wont* each summer.

**your/you're:** *Your* is a possessive adjective. *You're* is a contraction for *you are*.

Is this *your* hat or mine?

*You're* wasting my time with that argument.

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