

Small Stressors

Common Grammar and Usage Errors

The most important aspects of your paper, article, thesis, or dissertation include the quality of content (your professor or graduate committee), logic and clarity of organization (Chapter 2.2), thoughtful and ethical use of references (Chapter 2.3), and accuracy of expression (Chapter 2.4). Handling professional conventions such as APA format requirements (Chapter 2.1) are important if you are to come across as a qualified professional. Aspects of information handling, such as quotations and seriation (Chapter 2.5), contribute to the impression that you are capable and in control. But it's still hard to come across as a brilliant and well prepared professional if you have dangling modifiers or pronouns and antecedents that don't agree. Most of us realize this irony, and we stress over it.

This chapter focuses in on what might be called the "little stressors": matters of grammar and usage. Though not a valid measure of ability or competence, errors in grammar and usage can cause others to misinterpret and underestimate your ability and competence.

This chapter is not intended as an exhaustive guide to the mysteries of grammar and usage. It does present some fairly efficient charts and discussions to help you in making the most common grammar-usage decisions and avoiding the most common errors

Pronouns: Pesky References and Substitutes

A pronoun takes the place of a noun or noun equivalent. It has to have something to replace that is close by, easy to discern, and consistent with it. A pronoun needs to agree with its antecedent, and it needs to be in the right case.

Common Problems with Pronouns and Antecedents

| Problem | Rule | Example |
|---------------|---|---|
| No antecedent | Each pronoun must have a stated antecedent. | <p>Incorrect: They say that extensive assessment must precede treatment. (<i>Who is they?</i>)</p> <p>Correct: Researchers affirm that extensive assessment must precede treatment.</p> |

| Problem | Rule | Example |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Close antecedent | A pronoun must be close to its antecedent, without too much distraction in between. | <p>Confusing: The primary investigators, after long and exhaustive consultation with multicultural advisors representing six prevalent ethnic groups, decided that they would experiment with their selected population. (By the time you get to what was done, you forget who did it.)</p> <p>Clearer: The primary investigators decided that they would experiment with their selected population, having engaged in exhaustive consultation with multicultural advisors representing six prevalent ethnic groups.</p> |
| Squinting antecedent | A pronoun must refer clearly to one antecedent | <p>Confusing: The subjects were unresponsive to the researchers because they were embarrassed over their difficulty in learning how to read. (Who was embarrassed, and who had difficulty learning to read?)</p> <p>Clearer: In responding to the researchers, the subjects were embarrassed over their difficulty in learning how to read.</p> |
| Indefinite <i>it</i> | <i>It</i> is a pronoun. Avoid using <i>it</i> without an antecedent. | <p>Incorrect: It is difficult to perform. The teacher had difficulty understanding it. In Jacinski's article it says ,</p> <p>Correct: The literacy intervention is difficult to perform. The teacher had difficulty understanding the instructions. Jacinski's article says,</p> |
| <i>Who, which, and that</i> | <p>Use <i>who</i> for persons</p> <p>Use <i>that</i> for restrictive modifiers (those that actually change sentence meaning).</p> <p>Use <i>which</i> for nonrestrictive elements (Those that add information but do not change meaning). (The which/that distinction is rarely made in common practice, but APA makes it.)</p> | <p>Many children who participated improved their reading scores dramatically.</p> <p>The intervention that was chosen by the parents was implemented cautiously. (The statement tells which intervention is being discussed.)</p> <p>The sampling was not random, which negatively affects the potential of the study to be generalized to additional populations. (The information which follows does not change the fact that the sampling was not random.)</p> |

| Problem | Rule | Example |
|---|---|---|
| <i>anyone, anybody, someone, somebody, everyone, everybody etc.</i> | These forms are singular and thus require singular verbs and singular pronouns. | <p>Incorrect. Everybody who did not wish to continue their participation in the study was excused.</p> <p>Correct: Everybody who did not wish to continue his/her participation in the study was excused.</p> <p>Better: All who did not wish to continue their participation in the study were excused. (The singular <i>everybody</i> or <i>everyone</i> can usually be changed to the plural <i>all</i> with no loss of meaning.)</p> <p>Also better: Everybody who did not want to continue participating in the study was excused. (Simple restructuring may eliminate the pronoun.)</p> |

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

Pronoun-antecedent disagreement is one of the most common errors people make. In conversation most people tend to ignore it, and in conversational writing many people do. But you can't get away with it in your major paper, article, thesis, or dissertation. The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2001) makes a special point of discussing the problem, so this guidebook will do so as well.

Each parent was asked to support the literacy program by reading for 20 minutes a day with their child.

This sentence has a rather classic agreement problem. Educators of a generation and a half ago would have easily corrected it by using "his child" to designate a parent of either sex. Or they might have written "her child," since most reading parents have traditionally been mothers. But you can't get away with either of those in today's somewhat gender-paranoid society. The chart below gives a number of ways that the difficulty could be corrected without putting you in danger of having your face slapped. They are in approximate order of preference.

| Solution | Example |
|-------------------|---|
| Go to plural | Parents were asked to support the program by reading for 20 minutes a day with their children. (APA prefers this option unless singular is necessary to meaning.) |
| Use both pronouns | Each parent was asked to support the program by reading for 20 minutes a day with his or her child. |
| Eliminate pronoun | Each parent was asked to support the program by reading for 20 minutes a day with the child. |
| Recast sentence | Each parent was asked to support the parent-tutoring program by engaging in shared reading for 20 minutes a day. |
| Go to passive | The children were supported by having a parent read with them for 20 minutes a day. |

| Solution | Example |
|--------------------|--|
| Alternate pronouns | You can alternate pronouns by chapter or section: for example, using feminine pronouns to designate either sex in Chapter 1, masculine pronouns in Chapter 2 etc. In a short paper or article, you can alternate in headed sections. |

Pronoun Case

Most of us don't have a problem with pronoun case when it's a simple matter of someone or something doing or giving something to someone else. But when you get multiple doers and/or multiple receivers, or when the doers and receivers aren't normal people operating in normal fashion, you can get into some problems.

Where pronouns are concerned, subjects do and objects receive.

| Subjective | Objective |
|--------------------------|---|
| As subject or complement | As direct object, indirect object, or object of preposition |
| I | me |
| we | us |
| you | you |
| he/she/it | him/her/it |
| they | them |
| who | whom |

The distinction may not seem as clear when you get into compounds or into more complex sentence structure. But still you just decide whether the individual represented by the pronoun is doing or receiving.

| Circumstance | Rule | Example |
|--|--|--|
| Compound structure | Pronoun case doesn't change. To check, remove the compound. | Dr. Brown has been conducting research in this area; she and her colleagues are preparing an article for publication. (Subject: she is preparing) An award for original research will be presented to her coauthor, Dr. McArthur, and her. (Object: presented to her) |
| Appositives (words or phrases that rename nouns or pronouns) | Appositives take the same pronoun case as the word they rename. | I scheduled interviews with 9 randomly chosen participants. These sessions were conducted by two researchers: Dr. Brown and me. (Object: "Dr. Brown and me" renames <i>researchers</i> , thus "conducted by me") |
| <i>We</i> or <i>us</i> before a noun | Pronoun should be the case it would be without the noun. | We researchers are now concluding the interviews. (Subject: We are concluding) |

| Circumstance | Rule | Example |
|---|---|--|
| | | The results have been fascinating to us observers. (Object: fascinating to us) |
| Comparisons with <i>than</i> or <i>as</i> | When the verb is taken out, put it back mentally in order to choose the right pronoun. | Dr. Smith has been researching this topic longer than I. (Subject: longer than I have) There is no other colleague in the department I respect as much as her. (Object: as much as I respect her) |
| Use of <i>myself</i> | <i>Myself</i> is reflexive. It refers only to action performed on oneself. It cannot substitute for <i>I</i> or <i>me</i> . | Incorrect: Two graduate students and myself administered the intervention under the direction of Dr. Lewis. Correct: Two graduate students and I administered the intervention. (Subject) The students turned in the surveys to Dr. Lewis and me. (Object) |

Modifiers: Getting Extra Information Where It Doesn't Confuse or Embarrass You

When you describe, explain, or elaborate something (modify it), you know what you are describing, explaining, or elaborating. But the reader won't know unless you get the information in the right place. Out-of-place information can have frustrating (and sometimes amusing) results.

| Problem | Rule | Examples |
|--------------------|--|---|
| Dangling modifier | A modifier has to have something to modify (Get the thing modified into the sentence. If the children had the disabilities, they need to be in the sentence.) | Incorrect: Despite having disabilities, <i>the tests</i> were administered. (Unless the tests had disabilities, something is missing here.) Correct: Despite having disabilities, <i>the children</i> were tested. Also: Although the children had disabilities, <i>the tests</i> were administered. |
| Misplaced modifier | A modifier needs to be close to what it modifies. If it is closer to another item, it will seem to modify that item. | Incorrect: Subjects for the study were parents raising <i>young children</i> whose income was below poverty level. (Most young children do not earn income, poverty level or otherwise.) |

| Problem | Rule | Examples |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| | | Correct: Subjects for the study were <i>parents</i> whose income was below the poverty level who were raising young children. |
| Squinting modifier | Be careful that a modifier does not point equally to two different items | Incorrect: Proofreading thoroughly bores most of us. Option 1: Proofreading in a thorough manner bores most of us. Option 2: Proofreading is thoroughly boring for most of us. |
| Inappropriate comparison | Use comparative form for two, superlative form for three or more. | Incorrect: Compared with traditional resource, inclusion has resulted in the best socialization of students with disabilities. Correct: Inclusion has shown better socialization of students with disabilities than traditional resource. Correct: Compared to resource programs and residential schools, inclusion has shown the best socialization of deaf students. |
| Incomplete comparison | When using a comparative or superlative form, include all necessary items. | Incorrect: Results showed that the treatment group made greater advances in reading comprehension. Use: Results showed that the treatment group made greater advances than the control group in reading comprehension. |
| Adjective/ adverb confusion | Adjective answers <i>which, what kind, how many</i> . <i>Good</i> is an adjective. Adverb answers <i>when, how, how often, where</i> . <i>Well</i> is an adverb. | Establishing trust can be a slow process. Rice's article gives a good general definition for our purposes. The client was improving slowly. The weekly sessions with Jason seemed to go well. |

Apostrophe: To Possess or Not to Possess

Apostrophes allow you to juggle possessions and some omissions. As in life, indicating true possession can be a necessity, but indicating possession that does not exist can be problematic.

Possession

| Need | Rule | Examples |
|---|--|---|
| Singular nouns not ending in <i>s</i> | Add apostrophe + <i>s</i> | The researcher's conclusion, the article's content, everyone's concern |
| Singular nouns ending in <i>s</i> | Usually add apostrophe + <i>s</i> , occasionally just add apostrophe | Henry James's novels The hostess' solution (Too many surrounding <i>s</i> sounds makes this statement hard to say.) |
| Plural nouns not ending in <i>s</i> | Add apostrophe + <i>s</i> | The women's responses, the men's involvement |
| Plural nouns ending in <i>s</i> | Add apostrophe after <i>s</i> | The parents' input, the committees' responsibilities |
| Joint possession | Add apostrophe only after last noun if possessed together | McKenzie and McCullough's research study (They are working together on the same study.) |
| Similar possession | Add apostrophe to all names if possessed item is the same category but not the same item. | Both Taylor's and Curtis's research efforts are impressive. (Both are doing research, but not together.) |
| Do not use apostrophe with possessive pronouns. | You wouldn't use <i>hi's</i> or <i>her's</i> . <i>Its</i> is a personal pronoun, like <i>his</i> and <i>hers</i> . <i>It's</i> is the contraction for "it is." | Incorrect: The instrument was rejected because it's validity was not established. Correct: The instrument will be reconsidered when its validity has been established. |
| Do not use apostrophe with nouns that are not possessive. | Do not let an <i>s</i> on the end of a word tempt you to add an apostrophe if that word is merely plural, not possessive. | Incorrect: The participants' completed a social validity questionnaire. Correct: The participants found the intervention easy to implement in their classrooms. |

Omissions and Plurals

| | | |
|------------------|--|---|
| Omissions | Use apostrophe to mark letters left out of contractions. | don't, can't, won't etc. |
| Plurals | Use apostrophe for plurals of lower case letters and abbreviations with periods. | Many dyslexic students reverse <i>b's</i> and <i>d's</i> . (Letters are italicized, 's is not.) |

For numbers, capital letters, abbreviations without periods and words used as words, an apostrophe before *s* is optional.

the 1990s, the1990's

SLIs, SLI's

too many *but's* or too many *but's*

Misuse with Plural Do not use apostrophe with non-possessive plurals, except as shown above

Incorrect: Tests were administered to the student's.

Incorrect: The entrepreneurs' gave permission for their records to be examined.

Hyphen: The Modest Joiner

Now that word processing has eliminated most of the need for end-of-line division, the main use for the hyphen is to link up things that need to be kept together in order for their meaning to be clear. You might want to think of them as “word partners”—equally linked companions in the wisdom or mischief of expression.

Common Uses and Misuses of Hyphens

| Usage | Rule | Examples |
|---|--|--|
| Hyphenate | | |
| Two words that function as a modifying unit | Hyphenate if the unit comes before the noun. Do not hyphenate if it comes after. | <p>Many high-ranking authorities are cited.</p> <p>Many of the authorities are high ranking.</p> <p>Do not accept out-of-date information.</p> <p>The information he gave was out of date.</p> |
| <i>Self</i> , <i>all</i> , and <i>ex</i> (meaning former) words | Hyphenate words beginning with these prefixes. | <p>self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy</p> <p>all-encompassing, all-inclusive</p> <p>ex-partner, ex-compatriot</p> |
| Prefix ending with same vowel | Hyphenate if confusion is possible. (<i>Pre</i> and | anti-illiteracy, meta-analysis |

| Usage | Rule | Examples |
|--|--|--|
| with which root begins | <i>re</i> rarely hyphenate.) | |
| A prefix-root blend that has another meaning) | Hyphenate the less common of the words. | re-recreate/recreate co-operative/cooperative re-lease/release |
| Compound beginning with a number | Hyphenate when it precedes the term modified. | fourth–grade students two-part analysis |
| Compound when the base word is compound | Hyphenate for clarity. | non-English-speaking children |
| Prefix added to root word beginning with a capital | Hyphenate when adding a prefix. | un-American, anti-Semitic, |
| Letter, numeral, or abbreviation as root word | Hyphenate when adding a prefix. | a pre-NCLB assessment post-2000 research |
| Two or more prefixes sharing a base | Hyphenate both. | pre- and post-treatment interviews short- and long-term results |
| Do not Hyphenate | | |
| Two adjectives do not function as a unit. | If function is separate, do not hyphenate. | Three-counselor offices are now common. Three counselor offices are located on the first floor. |
| Units with an <i>ly</i> adverb | Do not hyphenate these compounds—they won't be confused. | This is a slowly evolving field of study. She chose a carefully documented methodology. |
| Units with a letter or numeral as the second partner | Do not hyphenate. | Type A personality Phase 2 reaction |
| A comparative or superlative adjective | Do not hyphenate. | the least competent research assistant |

Generalizations to Remember

Hyphenation is a tool for clarity.

If the relationship of the words is quite obvious, you do not need to hyphenate, even though the compound may meet one of the above criteria.

Some words are established as hyphenated regardless of usage or placement.

If your visual memory tells you that the combination doesn't "look right" without a hyphen, check your dictionary

Do not space before or after a hyphen.

Capitalization: Recognizing What Is Proper

It's a matter of what is "proper." Several common uses of capitalization are applied because of the way elements fit together into a sentence, a title, a heading or visual element. When capitalization of a name is involved, a proper (specific, individual) title, is generally capitalized. A generic label is not. Religions, races, ethnicities, and nationalities (and words derived from them) are considered proper and capitalized out of respect.

General Use of Capitals

| Usage | Rule | Example |
|---|---|--|
| Beginnings | The first word in a sentence | This study was designed to . . . |
| Statements following colons | The first word following a colon if the following statement is a complete sentence. | The researcher's expectation was fulfilled: The students performed better in experimental conditions. |
| Titles in text (books, articles, plays, poetry, other artistic works) | Capitalize major words (usually not short conjunctions, articles or short prepositions). All words of four letters or more. | <i>Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association</i> |
| Titles of books and articles on reference list | Capitalize only the first word and the first word following a colon or dash. | Social issues in the classroom: Focusing on thinking skills <i>Looking in classrooms</i> |
| Headings | Capitalize major words in all heading that are centered or at the left margin (Levels 1 and 2). Capitalize only the first word of headings at beginnings of paragraphs (Levels 3-5) | Early Research (1) Research Prior to 2000 (2) Early concept identification.(3) <i>Historical background. (4)</i> |
| Tables and figures | Capitalize major words in titles and legends | Figure 1: Timeline for Early Research Efforts |

| Usage | Rule | Example |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| Numbers or letters in a series | Capitalize nouns that precede numerals or letters, except for common parts of books or tables | (see Figure 4) Note changes during Baseline 3 but refer to chapter 5 |
| Sections of the same manuscript | Capitalize headings and subheadings | See Methods section |

Proper Names and Titles

- **Capitalize one person, one place, one specific unique thing.**
- **Capitalize words derived from a proper noun.**

| Category | Capitalize | Do Not Capitalize |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| People | Sir Isaac Newton/Newtonian physics | a physicist |
| | Dean Prater | a professor |
| | | the dean of the McKay School |
| Places | Spain/Spanish | a country, a language |
| | Timpview High School | a local high school |
| Things | Yellowstone National Park | a park, a wilderness area |
| Events | World War I | war, battle, confrontation |
| Periods | Renaissance (periods, events) | fifteenth century (not centuries) |
| Colleges, departments | Brigham Young University, Department of Teacher Education | the university |
| | | a department |
| Courses | English 400, Introduction to Humanities (catalogue titles) | a psychology class, humanities courses, but an English course (derived from name of country) |
| Religions, races, nationalities | Christianity, Buddhist, African American, Japanese | |
| Seasons | Do not capitalize seasons, even for term titles. | in the spring during fall semester |

| Category | Capitalize | Do Not Capitalize |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Academic titles | William Brown, PhD | a doctoral degree |
| Brand names, trademarks | Xerox, Prozac | copy machines, depression medication |
| Models, laws, theories | APA does not capitalize models, laws, and theories. | sensorimotor stage response to intervention Renzulli's triad model (name is capitalized, model title is not) |
| Exact titles of tests | Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory | a standardized personality assessment |
| Test subscales | Capitalize heading but not <i>test</i> or <i>scale</i> | Depression scale |
| Experiment groups or conditions | Condition C, Phase 2 (capitalize noun preceding number or letter) | control group, intervention group, tutoring condition (do not capitalize general designations) |
| Variables, factors, effects | Capitalize names of derived factors but not word <i>factor</i> . Behavior Disability factor. Capitalize when preceding number or letter: Factor 2. | Variables and effects are not capitalized unless written with multiplication signs: a significant Gender X Age interaction, but a significant gender effect. |

Italics vs. Quotation Marks: A Matter of Size and Significance

Quotation marks have a labeling function in addition to their major use of identifying direct quotations.

Both italics and quotation marks call attention to a title. If you want a basic principle of division, think of italics as a larger, more significant label.

Quotation Marks, Labels for Short or Common Things

| Use | Examples |
|---|--|
| To set off the title of a short work: article, chapter, short story, poem song etc. | Short work: In the chapter "The Idea of Multiple Intelligences," in the book <i>Frames of Mind</i> (1983), Gardner first gave an extensive rationale for the theory. (Note the chapter is in quotation marks, the book is italicized) |

| Use | Examples |
|---|---|
| Occasionally to set off ironic or slang usage or to indicate a coined expression. | Casual or personally distinctive usage: Children will go to great lengths to avoid being “uncool.” In the schoolroom Jason was an “average” child. His teachers did not see Jason as a “nuclear physicist in process.” |

Italics, More Distinctive Labels for Longer, Larger or More Inclusive Items

| Use | Examples |
|---|--|
| To indicate the title of a long work: book, periodical, ERIC or other microfilm document, play, opera, etc. | This research has been influenced by Gardner’s <i>Intelligence Reframed</i> (1999) and by extensions and applications from the journals <i>Gifted International</i> and <i>Roeper Review</i> . |
| To indicate a technical term or important label introduced as a label. | This form of adaptation for the gifted, commonly called <i>curriculum compacting</i> , is widely used to allow time for enrichment. |
| To indicate that a letter, word or phrase is used as a linguistic example. | As social scientists we are prone to lean too heavily on vague words such as <i>outcome based</i> . We may use them almost as heedlessly as we grade things <i>A, B</i> or <i>C</i> . |
| To indicate that a letter is used as a statistical symbol or algebraic variable | A <i>t</i> test was used to determine the relationship during the period of trial <i>c</i> . |
| To indicate scientific names and foreign words not in common use | In the classroom, Simon acted the part of the <i>enfant terrible</i> . But it was not Simon’s rowdy behavior per se that was most troubling to his teacher. (Italics not needed for fairly common usage like per se) |
| To indicate anchors in a survey or testing scale | Respondents were asked to evaluate on a scale of 1 (<i>strongly disagree</i>) to 5 (<i>strongly agree</i>). |
| Only occasionally for emphasis. (DO NOT USE BOLD FOR EMPHASIS.) | The likelihood of childhood depression in such cases <i>should not be underestimated</i> . |

Numbers: Conventions and Quirks

Like it or not, social scientists are forced to be number crunchers, and with the particular conventions in APA format, we can end up feeling a little crunched ourselves. APA follows the basic conventions with occasional quirks.

APA Conventions and Preferences

The chart below is based on the usage indicated in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2010), pp. 111-114.

| Use | Examples |
|------------------|----------|
| USE WORDS | |

| Use | Examples |
|---|---|
| Any number beginning a sentence or a title or heading. APA advises rewording sentence to try to avoid this. | Fifty-two participants substantially raised their scores. |
| Numbers below 10 that do not represent precise measurements. | three survey instruments, two treatment programs, approximately six weeks |
| Fractions | one half, two thirds |

USE NUMERALS

| | |
|---|---|
| Numbers 10 and above | 30 interviews, the 21 respondents, between 30 and 35 years of age, 12th-grade students |
| Numbers 10 and above even when grouped with lower numbers | the fifth of 22 questions; a reference base consisting of 24 articles, nine books, and 12 Internet sites |
| Units of measurement, mathematical or statistical data, scores on scales, quantities, ratios percentages etc. | the 85th percentile; 96% agreement; rated 3 on a 5-point scale; scored 85% and 94%, respectively |
| Items in a numbered series | Phase 3, Posttest 2, Table 5, chapter 7, page 82 |
| Items representing time, dates, ages etc. | exactly 4 years ago, 9-year-olds, August 22, 2004 |
| All numbers in the abstract | This study followed the academic and social progress of 8 students with autism, as observed by the 2 authors and 4 trained research assistants. |

USE A COMBINATION OF WORDS AND NUMERALS

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Rounded numbers of millions or more | at least 3 million people affected a \$3 million grant |
| Confusing modifiers | Avoid: three three-person work groups, 18 6-year-olds Use: Three 3-person work groups, eighteen 6-year-olds |

Ordinal Numbers

Ordinal numbers follow the same usage.

- third item
- 30th item
- 3rd, 10th, and 14th items
- fourth appointment scheduled
- 4th and 5th year of the study

Matters of Clarity and Efficiency

- Use 0 before a decimal if the number could be more than 1 but isn't. If it couldn't be more than one, don't bother.
 - The final calculation was 0.78
 - It was at the .05 level of significance.
- Round off decimal places as much as possible if doing so does not interfere with anticipated reader's use or with a matter of statistical accuracy.
- Use roman numerals only when they are part of published and widely accepted terminology: for example, "This project could be classified as one of Renzulli's Type III critical/creative activities."
- Use commas within most numbers over 1,000 with the exception of several contexts that could be awkward: page numbers, temperatures, acoustic frequencies.
- Form plurals of numbers by adding *s* or *es* as appropriate: threes, sixes, eights, 10s, 1990s.

For specific information on metrification, statistics, and tabular presentations, see the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Associations* (2010), pp. 115-118.

Word Usage: Things Your Spell Check Can't Tell You

Ironically, that wonderful spell check on your word processing program can keep you from misspelling *incubus*, but it can't keep you from missing *affect*. To add to your stress, there are some word usages and distinctions that you just have to learn.

English is a rich and varied language, but it can be a very confusing language. Because it is a hybrid of many languages—including German, Latin, Danish, and French, as well as the languages of the early British inhabitants—it's not particularly consistent. Words can be pronounced the same way or close to the same way and yet be different in how they are spelled and/or in what they mean. And of course words can have the same or very similar meanings and be spelled or pronounced in widely different ways. Another problem we have is that we often use words sloppily or inappropriately without realizing we have done so.

In conversation sloppiness seems to be a matter of mutual agreement—people listen just as sloppily as they talk. But in writing—particularly academic writing—we just have to be more careful. Following are some of the most common usage problems that trip us up. Memory devices have been included to help you recall distinctions. Most of these are not technical or even logical reasons—just tricks.

| Word 1 | Word 2 | Trick for Recall: Not Linguistic Reasons |
|---|---|---|
| Advice: That which is offered. The mentor offered useful advice. | Advise: The process of offering it. The mentor advised the novice to assess carefully. | <i>Advice</i> has "ice" in it. It's already happened, so it's more solid. |

| Word 1 | Word 2 | Trick for Recall: Not Linguistic Reasons |
|---|--|--|
| Affect: Verb meaning “to make a difference.” The teacher affects the child’s ability to learn. | Effect: Noun meaning a result. The effect of the treatment was positive. | Remember the e’s and a’s: <i>Effect</i> is a result; <i>affect</i> is action. Occasionally <i>effect</i> will be used as a verb meaning to cause, and <i>affect</i> will sometimes be used as a noun meaning a feeling or mood. |
| All ready: Indication that something is prepared. The experiment is all ready to proceed. | Already: Indication that time has passed quickly. We are already half way through the procedure. | If you could insert <i>are</i> , then use the two-word phrase: “all are ready” is <i>all ready</i> . |
| All together: Indication of gathering. Researchers for this project are all together on campus. | Altogether: Conversational intensifier. There is altogether too much noise in this classroom. | This pair works the same way as the pair above: If you could add <i>are</i> , use the two words—“all are together” is <i>all together</i> . |
| All right: Indication that all concerned are correct or satisfactory. The child’s answers were all right. | Alright: Incorrect usage This is a popular error, but it’s still an error. | It is not all right to jam <i>all right</i> together into “ <i>alright</i> .” |
| A lot: A vague and somewhat conversational way of say <i>often</i> or <i>much</i> . | Alot: Incorrect usage Allot is a different word; it means to apportion a share of something. We need to allot sufficient time. | You wouldn’t write “alittle,” so don’t write “alot.” |
| Beside: A preposition meaning next to. Sitting beside a child implies a supportive relationship. | Besides: An indication of something in addition or in exception. Besides making symptom assessment, a counselor should consider cultural affiliation. | Beside is alongside. The addition of <i>s</i> makes it an addition. |
| Device: An implement or tool. It was a useful device. | Devise: To create or figure out. The research team will need to devise a more accurate strategy. | Similar to <i>advice/advise</i> . Device contains ice ; it’s the more solid form. Devise is more slippery. |
| Conscience: A person’s intuitive mechanism for telling right from wrong. An individual’s conscience may function in healthy or unhealthy ways. | Conscious: A state of being awake or aware. The accident victims were interviewed soon after they became conscious. | Conscience contains science . Social scientists do study conscience as a phenomenon. <i>Consciousness</i> , or awareness, is a little vaguer. |

| Word 1 | Word 2 | Trick for Recall: Not Linguistic Reasons |
|---|--|--|
| Disinterested: A state of purposeful impartiality. In student conflicts, a teacher needs to take a disinterested stance. | Uninterested: A state of not caring. A symptom of depression is to become uninterested in activities formerly enjoyed. | <i>Disinterested</i> is more deliberate . <i>Uninterested is—uh,uh—</i> well just unconcerned . |
| Especially: An adverb meaning particularly or exceptionally. The counselor is especially concerned with the immigrant child’s adjustment problems. | Specially: An adverb used to indicate that something was done for a specific purpose. The treatment was specially designed for children with mild to moderate disabilities. | <i>Specially</i> refers to specific or specification . |
| Farther: An indication of additional distance (literally or figuratively). We are farther from understanding the concept than we had realized. | Further: An indication of a greater degree or extent. Can overlap <i>farther</i> for this meaning. Can be used as a verb meaning to aid or extend progress. He was instrumental in helping to further research in the area. | <i>Farther</i> refers mostly to distance (<i>far</i> usually does). <i>Further</i> is a little softer and can be used for softer, more abstract concepts. |
| Few or fewer: An indication of small quantity, used for items that could be counted. There are fewer subjects in Classroom 1 than in Classroom 2. | Less: Opposite of more. Used for items that cannot be counted. There will be less time to complete this study than we had originally planned. | Remember that <i>few</i> is the opposite of <i>many</i> ; <i>less</i> is the opposite of <i>more</i> : many problems/few problems; more experience/less experience. |
| Fortunate: An indication that something positive happened. It was fortunate that the subjects were well prepared. | Fortuitous: An indication that something happened by chance—not planned or anticipated. It was fortuitous that three of the randomly chosen subjects were from racial/cultural minority groups. | If something is fortunate , it happened by good fortune . If something is fortuitous , it is unplanned and unsolicited . |
| Good: An adjective, used to describe a person, place or thing. We were fortunate to be able to work with a good teacher. | Well: Most often an adverb used to describe actions. The subjects performed well. | Just remember the common “good job” and “well done.” You wouldn’t say “good done,” so don’t say “you’ve done good.” |
| Imply: To try to cause your reader or listener to think something without saying it explicitly. The subject didn’t | Infer: To figure out what the writer or speaker is really saying but not stating directly. From the subject’s account of the session, we inferred | <i>Imply</i> and <i>Infer</i> are two ends of the process— <i>imply</i> is what the communicator does, and <i>infer</i> is the recipient’s part. You might consider the related words: An implication |

| Word 1 | Word 2 | Trick for Recall: Not Linguistic Reasons |
|--|---|--|
| accuse the therapist of being incompetent, but he implied it as he gave his account of the session. | that he considered the therapist incompetent. | is what a writer makes; an inference is what the reader makes. |
| Its: A possessive pronoun, similar to <i>his</i> and <i>hers</i> . The study is nearing its conclusion. | It's: A contraction for "it is." It's late in the data gathering process. | Remember that you wouldn't write "hi's," "her's," or "your's"; <i>it</i> is a pronoun, not a noun. |
| Later: A comparative time relationship. On most days social studies was taught later than writing or mathematics. | Latter: A sequence relationship involving two items. Of the two studies mentioned, the latter is more convincing. | You can remember that later involves time because it has <i>late</i> in it. Since latter has two <i>t</i> 's, you can remember that it involves a sequence of two. |
| Lie: An action one performs oneself. The client needs to lie down until he is calmer. | Lay: An action one performs on something or someone else. Please lay the weapon on the floor. | Saying one is going to "lay down" or "lay out" is a very common error. Just remember that the only thing you can really "lay" on a sun deck is a bottle of sunscreen. |
| Loose: A state of not being tight, precise, or restrained. The comment is vague and is open to loose interpretation. | Lose: A verb meaning to misplace something or have it taken away. If he does not fulfill his commitment, he may lose his place on the research team. | Something which is loose is likely to have loopholes . Occasionally <i>loose</i> is used as a verb to indicate the action of making something loose: The judge has been known to loose the bonds of strict interpretation. |
| Media: Plural form of <i>medium</i> , often used to refer to public communications media such as television, radio, and journalism. Media publicity is a powerful tool. | Medium: A means for conveying messages. Television is a powerful and potentially dangerous medium of communication. | Since we often think of a "medium" as one who conducts a séance, picture the medium sitting at a table, all alone, without other voices to validate her. The media, of course, have plenty of collaboration and back up. |
| Moral: Something consistent with one's code of ethics. Teaching involves moral dimensions and choices. | Morale: Positive feeling or attitude. Morale was high among teachers undertaking the inclusion experiment. | Remember that moral is ethical. If you like to think of ale as giving one spirited feelings, you could remember morale in that way. |
| Number of: Quantity of something that can be counted. A large number of potential subjects are available. | Amount of: Quantity of something that cannot be counted. The report contains a significant amount of specialized information. | Children learn numbers by using manipulatives—items that can be counted and assigned specific numbers. Don't use numbers for things they can't manipulate. |

| Word 1 | Word 2 | Trick for Recall: Not Linguistic Reasons |
|--|--|---|
| People: A group of individuals in a general, overall sense. Most people are concerned with violence in today's schools. | Persons: A small, specific, countable group of individuals. Nine persons volunteered to be interviewed. | Both words mean the same thing. The context makes the difference—and it's not a major one. Just remember the preamble: "We the people of the United States. . . ." |
| Phenomenon: Something which can be observed, often applied to something out of the ordinary. We were startled as we observed the phenomenon. | Phenomena: Plural of <i>phenomenon</i> . Several unexpected phenomena were observed with this study. | As with <i>medium</i> and <i>media</i> , the "a form" is the plural. |
| Practical: Designation for a concrete, sensible, useful way of doing something. Singing a well-known song is a practical way of calming young children after recess | Practicable: Designation for something that can be done. The experimental procedure was complicated but practicable. | <i>Practicable</i> means you are able to put something into practice . <i>Practical?</i> If you calculate practicality , you can ask if it makes sense to do it. |
| Precede: Something comes before something else. Hard work precedes discovery. | Proceed: Something moves forward. We need to proceed with the steps of implementation. | <i>Pre</i> always means before. For <i>proceed</i> , remember <i>progress</i> . |
| Principal: A general term meaning first or main—often specifically applied to the chief administrator of a school or other organization. The principal consideration is time efficiency. The principal called a meeting of faculty. | Principle: A rule, law, or assumption on which thinking or activity is based. The controversy over school prayer is based on the principle of separation of church and state. | School children used to recite, "The principal is the student's pal." This is a good device for remembering the distinction. Another little trick is to remember that <i>principle</i> and <i>rule</i> end in the same way. |
| Rise: The action of someone or something moving upward or increasing. The number of adolescents with eating disorders is rising. Education is a means for helping people rise above poverty. | Raise: The action of moving something or someone else upward or of increasing a quantity. We need to raise the percentage of children who are reading on grade level. We need to help raise children's self-esteem. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The distinction is the same as between <i>lie</i> and <i>lay</i>. <i>Rise</i>, like <i>lie</i>, is something you do for yourself. It even has the same internal sound as <i>lie</i>. <i>Raise</i> is something you do for someone or something else. It has the same internal sound as <i>lay</i>. Both can apply to persons, to things, or to abstract quantities. |
| Sit: The action of placing oneself in a sitting position. The children were asked to enter quietly and sit at their tables. | Set: The action of placing something or someone else, usually in a specific position or on a surface. As they took their seats, | The <i>sit/set</i> pair is a first cousin of <i>lie/lay</i> and <i>rise/raise</i> . The "i" word is what "I do for myself"; the other is what I do to something or someone else. |

| Word 1 | Word 2 | Trick for Recall: Not Linguistic Reasons |
|--|---|---|
| | the children set their notebooks and pencils on the tables in front of them. | |
| Then: A position word that indicates time sequence. The therapist makes a simple request and then observes the child's response. | Than: A word indicating comparison. Working together is more effective than working in isolation. | If you read your sentence aloud, your ear will pick up the difference. Many of us are more conditioned to the sound than to the spelling. |
| There: Indication of place (put the table over there) or existence (there are three children involved). | Their: Possessive pronoun. (The research assistants completed their report.) | They're: Contraction of "they are." There is not really a trick. People just train their visual memory. |
| To: Preposition indicating position or possibly destination (to the front of the room, to the students). Also the function word for the infinitive form of the verb (to walk, to seem, to study). | Too: Adverb meaning also or in addition. (After the mothers had agreed to implement the program, many of the fathers agreed to participate too.) Can also be used to indicate that something is excessive. (The procedure took too much time.) | Two: Number between one and three. Two teachers initially implemented the program. Again, visual memory seems to be the best trick. You can think of <i>too</i> as having too many <i>o's</i> . |
| Whether: Introduction to an indirect question or to an expression of doubt. I do not know whether the test has been administered. | Weather: Atmospheric condition. The weather interfered with the planned activity. | Remember that <i>whether</i> works like <i>which</i> , <i>when</i> , and <i>who</i> . Just place it in its proper family, and you shouldn't have any problem with it. |

When in doubt about any word, check your dictionary—paper or online. Doing so only takes a moment, and it can save a good deal of embarrassment.

Questionable Language: Avoiding Offense

Because language reflects attitude and disposition, we can offend unintentionally by the words we use. Carelessness or outdated usage can be hurtful, even when we do not intend for it to be.

Even if you do not feel personally offended by usage, others do; and your writing will not be effective if you offend members of your audience. Just to be safe, be careful with the following.

| Category | Sample Problem Words | Safer Usage |
|---|---|--|
| "Man" words used to indicate both sexes | man (as species), mankind, man-made, manpower policeman, chairman | humans or people, humankind, human-made, work force, police officer, chair |

| Category | Sample Problem Words | Safer Usage |
|--|---|--|
| Person-first language (The person is more important than the disability—put the person first.) | retarded child, handicapped adolescent, autistic individual | child with mental retardation, adolescent with a disability, individual with autism |
| Referring to a person with a condition or disability by the disability. | The depressive requested an appointment. The retard requires special help. The handicap needed individual teacher attention. | The client who was depressed requested an appointment. The person with retardation requires special help. The child with a disability needed individual teacher attention. |
| Words formerly accepted for ethnic or racial groups that are considered today to hint at disrespect. | Indian, Negro, Eskimo, Oriental If you have doubts as to the term preferred by a group you have observed or worked with in a study, ask someone who is a member of that group. | Native American, African American (some prefer Black—be sure to capitalize it), Inuit, Asian (Asian American) Hispanic individuals may prefer Latino/Latina. Be as specific as possible on national groups: Korean rather than Asian, Navajo rather than Native American. |
| Sexual references and sexual orientation | A full 54% of the participants were of the female sex. The client explained to the therapist that she had homosexual feelings. | <i>Gender</i> is used for social or cultural groups; <i>sex</i> is used in discussing physical processes. Participants were of the female gender. Use “lesbian feelings.” Avoid the label <i>homosexual</i> . |

Don't set the "little stressors" cause you even a little stress. Look up potential problems and take care of them. If you can avoid the common errors pointed out in this chapter, you can avoid a lot of the difficulties students have in getting the response they want to their papers, theses, dissertations and articles. Errors in mechanics are not a measure of intelligence or ability, but unfortunately people react to them as if they were. Just take the time to proofread carefully. When you have a question about something look it up in this manual, in your old freshman English handbook, or on one of the excellent writing laboratory sites on the Internet (e.g., Purdue's Online Writing Lab; OWL). You wouldn't take risks in the way you dress or groom yourself for your defense. Don't take comparable risks in the way you groom your written work.

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