

Most Common Grammatical, Spelling and Vocabulary Errors

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1. Commonly Misused Vocabulary

- Disinterested means “free from bias.” Uninterested means “not showing interest in something.”
- Penultimate means second-to-last; it is not another word for “ultimate.”
- To focus or zoom in on something is to home in on it, not to hone. To hone means to improve (i.e., hone your skills).
- Peruse means “to read carefully,” not “to skim.”
- To complement means to complete or to go well with something else; to compliment is to praise someone or something.
- Nonplussed means to be confused or discombobulated; it does NOT mean to be calm, serene or bored.
- Adverse means detrimental, as in “adverse effects.” Averse means opposed or disinclined.
- Historic means famous, important, and influential. Historical means related to history.
- Amoral means not concerned with morality (e.g., how I choose to dress is an *amoral* act). Immoral means something that does not conform to accepted standards of morality (e.g., it is *immoral* to discriminate against someone because of their race or ethnicity).
- Eminent means famous or respected. Imminent means about to take place. Immanent means inherent or intrinsic.
- To ascribe means to designate something as having caused, or been caused by, something else (e.g., you shouldn’t *ascribe* negative traits to me just because I’m shy). To subscribe means to be in agreement, or to approve (e.g., I *subscribe* to the doctrine of non-interference).
- Both born and borne are past-tense forms of the verb “to bear.” Born is the commonly used past tense of “to give birth,” and is used in the passive voice (e.g., she was *born* in New York). Borne is the past-tense form for all other uses of the verb “to bear”—for everything *except* “to bear children.” It is usually used to refer to carrying something, especially in the figurative sense (like carrying a burden). For example: “The costs of the program were *borne* by the taxpayers,” or “so we beat on, boats against the current, *borne* back ceaselessly into the past.”

2. Common Homophones

Homophones are words that sound alike but are spelled differently. Some of the most common homophonic mistakes are listed below.

- Her writing had a lot of **flair** ~~flare~~.
 - The movie **piqued** ~~peaked~~ her interest in the subject.
 - His outburst didn't **faze** ~~phase~~ me.
 - I didn't let his outburst **affect** ~~effect~~ me. [*affect is a verb*]
 - His outburst didn't have much **effect** ~~affect~~ on me. [*effect is a noun*]
 - I believe it is possible to **effect** ~~affect~~ change. [*effect is also a verb, meaning "to bring about"*]
 - Washington, D.C. is the **capital** ~~capitol~~ of the United States.
 - Members of Congress met in the **Capitol** ~~capital~~ yesterday.
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3. American versus British English

- Use toward, not towards
 - Use amid, not amidst
 - Periods and commas go inside the quotation marks, even if they are not part of the quotation. However, all other punctuation symbols go outside the quotation marks if they are not a part of the quotation itself:
 - “Come over here,” she said.
 - Did she say “Come over here”?
 - “Will you come over here?” she said.
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4. Wrong Tense or Verb Form

Errors of wrong tense include using a verb that does not clearly indicate when an action or a condition is, was, or will be completed—for example, using walked instead of had walked, or will go instead of will have gone. Errors of wrong form include confusing the forms of irregular verbs (such as go, went, and gone) or treating these verbs as if they followed the regular pattern—for example, using beginned instead of began.

- **By the time Ian arrived, Jill ~~died~~ had died.**
 - The verb died does not clearly state that the death occurred before Ian arrived.

- **Joe should have ~~went~~ gone to the store.**

– The verb to go has irregular past-tense forms.

Remember also that the past tense is not the same as a past participle: The past tense of “to go” is “went” (I went there) but the past participle of “to go” is “gone” (I should have gone). Other examples:

- I ate/I should have eaten
- I drove/I had driven
- I took/I had taken
- I ran/I should have run

If you’re not sure what the past participle of a verb is, look it up.

Notes:

- The past tense of the verb “to lead” is led, NOT “lead.”
 - To lie means to be in a horizontal position. To lay means to set something down.
 - The past tense of the verb “to lie” (as in, lie down in a bed) is “lay,” and the past participle is “lain.”
 - The past tense of the verb “to lay” (as in, to lay a piece of paper on the table) is “laid.”
 - The present participle of “to lie” is “lying,” and the present participle of “to lay” is “laying.”
 - The past tense of the verb “to hang,” i.e., to be suspended, is “hung”: “I hung the towel on the rack.” The past tense of the verb “to hang,” i.e., to be suspended by the neck until dead, is “hanged”: “The prisoner was hanged.”
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5. Missing Comma After an Introductory Statement

Readers usually need a small pause between an introductory word, phrase, or clause and the main part of the sentence, a pause most often signaled by a comma. Try to get into the habit of using a comma after every introductory element. When the introductory element is very short, you don’t always need a comma after it. But you’re never wrong if you do use a comma.

- **Determined to get the job done, we worked all weekend.**
 - **In German, nouns are always capitalized**
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6. Wrong or Missing Prepositions

- We met ~~in~~ on Union Street **in** San Francisco
 - “In” and “on” both show place, but use “on” with a street and “in” with a city.
- President Richard Nixon compared the United States ~~with~~ **to** a “pitiful, helpless giant.”
 - Compare to means “regard as similar”; compare with means “to examine to find similarities or differences.” The best way to remember the difference is this: If you’re comparing two things that are essentially like each other, use “compare with”: “Compared with Great Britain, America is more individualistic.” But when you’re comparing two things that are not apparently alike, and in fact might prima facie be very different from each other (like the United States and a giant), use “compare to.”

Many words in English are regularly used with a particular preposition to express a particular meaning. Throwing a ball to someone is different from throwing a ball at someone. Because many prepositions are short and not stressed or pronounced clearly in speech, they are often accidentally left out or mixed up in writing.

Example:

- You do something by accident, NOT “on accident.”
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7. Comma Splices

A **comma splice** occurs when only a comma separates clauses that could each stand alone as a sentence. To correct a comma splice, you can insert a semicolon or period, connect the clauses clearly with a word such as and or because, or restructure the sentence.

- Westward migration has passed Wyoming ~~by,~~ **;** even the discovery of gold in nearby Montana failed to attract settlers.
 - I was strongly attracted to her~~,~~ **;** she had special qualities.
 - We hated the meat loaf~~,~~ **that** the cafeteria served ~~it~~ every Friday.
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8. Vague Pronoun Reference

A **pronoun**—a word such as *she, yourself, his, they, it, this, who, or which*—should clearly refer to the word or words it replaces (called the **antecedent**) elsewhere in the sentence or in a previous sentence. If more than one word could be the antecedent or if no specific antecedent is present in the sentence, edit to make the meaning clear.

Possible reference to more than one word:

- Transmitting radio signals by satellite is a way of overcoming the problem of scarce airwaves and limiting how ~~they~~ **the airwaves** are used.
 - Does they refer to the signals or the airwaves? The editing clarifies what is being limited.

Reference implied but not stated:

- The company prohibited smoking, ~~which~~ **a policy that** many employees resented.
 - What does which refer to? The editing clarifies what employees resented.

9. Unnecessary Shift in Pronouns

An unnecessary pronoun shift occurs when a writer who has been using one pronoun to refer to someone or something shifts to another pronoun for no apparent reason.

- **When one first sees a painting by Georgia O’Keeffe, ~~you are~~ **one is** impressed by a sense of power and stillness.**

10. Lack of Agreement Between Pronoun and Antecedent

- **Each of the puppies thrived in ~~their~~ **its** new home.**
 - Many indefinite pronouns, such as *everyone, each, someone, every, either, neither, nobody, none, any, another* and *much*, are always singular.
- **Either Joe or Jane will be asked to give ~~their~~ **her** speech to the graduates.**
 - When antecedents are joined by *or* or *nor*, the pronoun must agree with the closer antecedent.
- **The team frequently changed ~~their~~ **their** positions to get varied experience.**

- A collective noun can be either singular or plural, depending on whether the people are seen as a single unit or as multiple individuals. Thus, in the above sentence, either *its* or *their* is correct.
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11. Unnecessary Comma(s) with a Restrictive Element

A **restrictive element** is essential to the basic meaning of the sentence. It is not set off from the rest of the sentence with commas.

- **People, who wanted to preserve wilderness areas, opposed the plan to privatize national parks.**
 - The reader needs the clause who wanted to preserve wilderness areas because it announces which people opposed the plan. The clause should not be set off with commas.
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12. Missing Comma(s) With a Nonrestrictive Element

A **nonrestrictive element**—one that is not essential to the basic meaning of the sentence—could be removed and the sentence would still make sense. Use commas to set off any nonrestrictive parts of a sentence.

- Marina, who was president of the club, was first to speak.
 - The reader does not need the clause *who was the president of the club* to know the basic meaning of the sentence: Marina was first to speak. This is a nonrestrictive element of the sentence.
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13. Misplaced or Dangling Modifier

Every modifier (whether a word, phrase, or clause) should be as close as possible to the word it describes or relates to. **Misplaced modifiers** may confuse your readers by seeming to modify some other element in the sentence.

- **With binoculars, the** The hikers could see the eagles swooping and diving. ~~with binoculars.~~
 - Who was wearing the binoculars—the eagles?

A **dangling modifier** hangs precariously from the beginning or end of a sentence, attached to no other part of the sentence. The element that the phrase modifies may exist in your mind but not in your draft. Each modifier must refer to some other element in the sentence.

- Looking down the sandy beach, **we see that** people are tanning.
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14. Missing Comma in a Compound Sentence

A **compound sentence** consists of two or more parts that could each stand alone as a sentence. When the parts are joined by a **coordinating conjunction**—*and, but, so, yet, or, nor, or for*—use a comma before the conjunction to indicate a pause between the two thoughts. In very short sentences, the comma is optional if the sentence can be easily understood without it. But you’ll never be wrong to use a comma.

- The words “I do” may sound simple, **but** they mean a life commitment.
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15. Missing or Misplaced Possessive Apostrophe

To make a noun possessive, add either an apostrophe and an *-s* (*Ed’s book*) or an apostrophe alone (*the boys’ gym*).

- Overambitious parents can be very harmful to a child’s well-being.
 - Pedro Martinez is one of the Mets **Mets’** most electrifying pitchers.
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16. Sentence Fragment

A **sentence fragment** is part of a sentence that is written as if it were a whole sentence, with a capital letter at the beginning and a period, a question mark, or an exclamation point at the end. A fragment may lack a **subject**, a complete **verb**, or both. Other fragments may begin with a **subordinating conjunction**, such as *because*, and so depend for their meaning on another sentence. Reading your draft out loud, backwards, sentence by sentence, will help you spot sentence fragments.

No Subject:

- Marie Antoinette spent huge sums of money on herself and her favorites. **And Her extravagance** helped bring on the French Revolution.

No Complete Verb:

- The old aluminum boat **was** sitting on its trailer.
 - *Sitting* cannot function alone as the verb of the sentence. The auxiliary verb *was* makes it a complete verb.

Beginning with Subordinating Word:

- We returned to the drugstore, **where** ~~Where~~ we waited for our buddies.
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17. Lack of Subject-Verb Agreement

A **verb** must agree with its subject in **number** and in **person**. In many cases, the verb must take a form depending on whether the subject is **singular** or **plural**: *The old man is angry and stamps into the house*, but *The old men are angry and stamp into the house*. Lack of subject-verb agreement is often just a matter of carelessly leaving the -s ending off the verb or of not identifying the subject correctly.

NOTE: Remember, indefinite pronouns such as *everyone, each, someone, every, either, neither, nobody, none, any, another* and *much*, are singular and require the singular verb form.

- A strategist behind the scenes ~~create~~ **creates** the candidate's public image.
 - The subject is the singular noun *strategist*, not *scenes*.
 - Each of these designs ~~coordinate~~ **coordinates** with the others.
 - The subject is the singular pronoun *each*, not *designs*.
 - There ~~is~~ **are** two main reasons that I want to become a lawyer.
 - The subject, *reasons*, is plural, so the verb is plural.
 - My brothers or my sister ~~come~~ **comes** every day to see Dad.
 - Here, the noun closest to the verb is singular (*sister*). The verb must agree with that singular noun.
 - Johnson was one of the athletes who ~~was~~ **were** disqualified.
 - Here, *who* refers to *athletes*, so the verb is plural.
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18. Fused Sentence

A **fused sentence** (also called a **run-on sentence**) is created when **clauses** that could stand alone as a sentence are joined with no punctuation or words to link them. Fused sentences must be either divided into separate sentences or joined by adding words or punctuation.

- The current was swift. **He** ~~he~~ could not swim to shore.
 - **Although she** ~~She~~ doubted the value of medication, she decided to try it once.
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19. Possessive Use with Gerunds

A **gerund** is a **noun** made from a **verb root** plus *-ing* (a present participle). A whole gerund phrase functions in a sentence just like a noun, and can act as a subject or an object, whereas a **present participle** acts like a verb or adjective.

Because **gerunds** function as **nouns**, if a noun or pronoun precedes a gerund, it must be in the **possessive** case to modify the gerund.

- **My** ~~Me~~ babysitting my younger siblings prepared me to be a camp counselor.
 - I deeply appreciate **your** ~~you~~ working tirelessly to complete this report.
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20. Proper use of Reflexive Pronouns

Reflexive pronouns are words ending in *-self* or *-selves* that are used when the subject and the object of a sentence are the same (*I believe in myself*). They can act as either objects or indirect objects.

NOTE: The nine reflexive pronouns in English are *myself, yourself, himself, herself, oneself, itself, ourselves, yourselves, and themselves*.

- He told my wife and **me** ~~myself~~ about it.
- Andrew and **I** ~~myself~~ will conduct today's meeting.
- You may submit your expenses to Mr. Martin or **me** ~~myself~~ before Friday.