

COMMON WRITING ERRORS



CONFUSING WORDS

1. AFFECT V. EFFECT:

Most of the time, *affect* is a verb, and *effect* is a noun. There are a few exceptions, but they are rare.

- a. The sermon affected me greatly.
- b. The sermon had a great effect on me.

2. LIE V. LAY:

Lie does not require an object; *lay* does require an object.

Note: Do not be confused by the past tense of these verbs either. The past tense of *lie* is *lay*; the past tense of *lay* is *laid*.

- a. I need to lie down for awhile.
- b. I lay down for an hour and felt better.
- c. Please lay the book on the table before you go.
- d. He laid the book on the table before he went.

3. COMPLIMENT V. COMPLEMENT:

A *compliment* is a nice thing someone says or does for someone else; it can be a noun or a verb. A *complement* is something that supplements something else; it completes.

- a. You gave me a great compliment when you asked me to be on this committee.
- b. Allison's publishing skills are a great complement to Emily's writing.

4. GOOD V. WELL:

Good is an adjective; *well* is an adverb.

- a. You gave me a good performance evaluation.
- b. My performance evaluation went very well.

5. ACCEPT V. EXCEPT:

Accept means to acknowledge, allow, recognize, or approve; *except* means to exclude. *Except* also means "with the exception of..."

- a. I accepted his candidacy for the job.
- b. Except a man be born again, he will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

6. PRINCIPLE V. PRINCIPAL:

Principle is an adjective that refers to a rule to follow. *Principal* as an adjective means "the most important." *Principal* can also be a noun referring either to a high-ranking school administrator or an amount of debt incurred.

- a. Our guiding principle should always be love of God and others.
- b. The principal commandments are to love God and to love others.

7. STATIONERY V. STATIONARY:

Stationery is a type of paper you write on. *Stationary* means immovable.

- a. The stationery was marked with the school seal.
- b. This computer station is stationary.

8. THERE V. THEY'RE V. THEIR:

There is a location word. The combination "*there is*" also indicates that something exists. *Their* is a plural possessive adjective. *They're* means "they are."

- a. Your book is over there.
- b. There is no way I'm going to Sri Lanka this summer.
- c. Their t-shirts were worn inside out to cover up the logos.
- d. They're going to go to Madagascar in June.

9. TO V. TWO V. TOO:

To is a preposition indicating direction. *Two* is a number. *Too* means also.

- a. I'm going to Campus North for a coffee.
- b. I am tired enough that I may need to drink two cups.
- c. Do you want to come along too?

10. FEWER V. LESS:

Fewer is used with items you can count; *less* is used with items you measure.

- a. I have fewer friends now that I'm older.
- b. I have less courage than I did when I was young.

11. EVERYDAY V. EVERY DAY:

Everyday means ordinary. *Every day* means each day of the week.

- a. These are my everyday clothes.
- b. I wear scrubs to work every day.

12. APART V. A PART:

Apart means separately; *a part* means a piece or a unit of the whole.

- a. I hate spending the weekends apart from my friends.
- b. Spending time together is a part of true friendship.

13. ROLL V. ROLE:

Used as a noun, *roll* is a list. It is also a verb that describes a physical movement that involves turning end over end. *Role* is a part that one plays or a duty one fulfills.

- a. I'm going to take on the role of leading music.
- b. I will take the roll when everyone is seated.
- c. Stop rolling your pen around on the desk.

14. COUNCIL V. COUNSEL:

A *council* is an administrative body; a *counsel* is someone giving legal advice. To *counsel* means to advise.

- a. I will present the zoning request to Lynchburg City Council.
- b. I wish to converse with legal counsel before I proceed.
- c. Can you counsel me about my finances?

15. FURTHER V. FARTHER:

Further means "extent"; *farther* refers to distance.

- a. Let's take this argument a step further.
- b. I climbed farther up the mountain than he did.

16. IT'S/ITS/ITS':

It's is "it is"; *its* is a possessive pronoun; *its'* is not a word.

- a. It's going to snow.
- b. The dog has its bone.

17. A LOT/ALOT/ALLOT:

A *lot* is an informal way to say "many"; *alot* means "to assign" or "to distribute"; *alot* is not a word.

- a. A lot of women are going to the conference.
- b. I have allotted five dollars for lunch each day next week.

AGREEMENT

17. SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

- a. Each of the boys is going to church Sunday.
- b. The team are not playing as a unit.

18. PRONOUN-ANTECEDENT AGREEMENT

- a. Each of the students has his book.

MODIFICATION

19. AVOID DANGLING MODIFIERS:

Every clause or phrase acting as an adverb or adjective must modify another word or phrase in the sentence in a grammatical fashion.

- ◇ Incorrect: Walking into the doctor's office, the new wallpaper caught my attention.
Note: The underlined portion *should* modify "I," since it describes what I was doing; however, the word "I" is nowhere to be found.
- ◇ Correct: Walking into the doctor's office, I noticed the new wallpaper.
Note: The underlined portion modifies "I."
- ◇ Correct: As I walked into the doctor's office, I noticed the new wallpaper.
Note: The underlined portion modifies "noticed."

20. AVOID MISPLACED MODIFIERS:

Every adjective clause or phrase should modify the noun to which it is closest. Putting the clause beside another noun can lead to confusion.

- ◇ Incorrect: It is a bad idea to give pizza to people on paper plates.
Note: The underlined portion modifies "people," which makes it sound like the people are standing on the paper plates.
- ◇ Correct: It is a bad idea to give people pizza on paper plates.
Note: Now it's right: the pizza, not the people, is on the plate.

21. AVOID SQUINTING MODIFIERS:

Make sure it is clear which word or phrase your clause modifies. If a word, clause, or phrase is equidistant between two possible referents, confusion could result.

- ◇ Incorrect: Thanks to the firefighters only he was rescued.
Note: It is unclear if only modifies "firefighters" or "he," which means the sentence's meaning is unclear.
- ◇ Correct: Thanks to the firefighters, he was the only one rescued.
Note: Now "only" modifies "one" — he was the sole survivor.
- ◇ Correct: Thanks only to the firefighters, he was rescued.
Note: Now the placement of "only" means that the firefighters acted alone.

PARALLEL STRUCTURE

22. LISTS

When you write sentence that includes a list, all the items in the list need to be grammatically parallel. For instance, if you want to name all the things you bought at the store, then you need to make sure that every item on your list is a noun.

- ◇ Incorrect: At Wal-Mart on Saturday, I bought Q-Tips, apples, spinach, and got a roasted chicken for lunch.

Hint: All items in this list are grammatically parallel except for “got a roasted chicken for lunch.”

- ◇ Correct: At Wal-Mart on Saturday, I bought Q-Tips, apples, spinach, and roasted chicken.
Hint: All the items in this list are nouns, so the list is parallel.
- ◇ Incorrect: The greatest commandments are to love God with all our hearts, minds, and strength and loving others as ourselves.
Hint: “To love God” is an infinitive; “loving others” is a gerund. They are not parallel.
- ◇ Correct: The greatest commandments are to love God with all our hearts, minds, and strength and to love others as ourselves.

23. CORRELATIVE CONJUNCTIONS

When you use correlative conjunctions such as “not only...but also,” you need to make sure the words that follow each half of the conjunction are also parallel.

- ◇ Incorrect: I went not only to the store, but also cooked dinner.
Hint: The prepositional phrase “to the store” and the verb phrase “cooked dinner” are not parallel.
- ◇ Correct: Not only did I go to the store, but I also cooked dinner.
Hint: Now the sentence is parallel: you have two verb phrases.

OTHER THINGS TO WATCH FOR

24. ORGANIZATION

Have a strong thesis and transitions and a clearly visible structure. Clarity is always a high priority; never assume you’ll be understood as you intend.

25. EVIDENCE

All claims need evidence; all evidence should point to claims.

26. COHESIVE PARAGRAPHS

Paragraphs should address only one topic.

27. QUOTATIONS

Only quote directly when you need to; otherwise, paraphrase.

28. CITATIONS

Cite everything!

29. BAD SENTENCES

Never, never, never leave a fragment or a run-on in your paper.