Chapter 14

Avoid Common Pitfalls in Word Choice, Grammar, and Spelling

In this chapter

- **Commonly confused words.** Word pairs and trios that you may be using incorrectly, plus words that your readers may misinterpret.
- **Frequently misspelled words.** We've all misspelled at least one of these.
- **Common grammatical mistakes.** Eight potential trouble areas and ideas for handling each.
- **Old “rules” that no longer apply.** Three rules you don’t have to put up with.

Grammatical rules, correct spelling... do we have to? On the Web, new words come and go with alarming speed, casual frequently edges out formal, and sticking to rules may seem like a waste of time. But rules and forms serve an important function in writing: They create an invisible structure that helps readers understand your sentences easily, without having to stop and puzzle out the meaning.

Resources such as *The Chicago Manual of Style* can give you a solid foundation in the basic rules of grammar, punctuation, and the mechanics of style, and other books that focus on grammar go into more detail than we do here. What this chapter highlights are some common trouble spots and errors that can undermine your text’s readability and even harm your website’s credibility. Once you recognize these pitfalls, you can avoid them on your site.

**Commonly confused words**

The English vocabulary is vast and growing, and capable of conveying many subtle shades of meaning. Yet its richness can lead a writer to use a word incorrectly or to craft sentences that are easy to misinterpret.
For clear writing:

- When you’re in doubt about a word, **look it up** in your preferred dictionary and pay special attention to usage notes.
- **Favor words with distinct meanings** over words that have multiple meanings.

Be especially vigilant about words that are known to confuse writers and readers.

**Words that may confuse writers**

Even the best writers can mix up words, especially *homophones*: words that sound alike even though they have different spellings and different meanings. Watch for the following homophones and other tricky words—and keep in mind that a spell-checker can’t always distinguish one homophone from another.

**affect, effect**

Both *affect* and *effect* have several meanings. Generally, use *affect* as a verb; use *effect* when you need a noun.

**Example**

“Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” had gripping fight scenes and special effects, but ultimately its love stories will affect you most.

*Affect* can be a noun, but only when it means the observable expression of an emotion: *Participants with a happy effect were generally more successful in the task than participants with a sad effect.* (Hint: You probably won’t be using *effect* as a noun unless you’re writing about psychology.) And *effect* can be a verb only when it means “to bring about,” usually in the face of great obstacles: *Dismayed by his heavy work schedule, the ant hoped to effect change in the colony.*

**all ready, already**

*All ready* means “completely prepared”; *already* describes something that has occurred before a specific time.
Example

If you've already entered your account information, you're all ready to start.

Consider whether you need to include *all ready* or *already*. Does your sentence really need either one?

T I P

Example

**Before**

If you've already entered your account information, you're all ready to start.

**After**

If you've entered your account information, you're ready to start.

all right, alright

Most grammarians say that you must never use *alright*—that it's always all wrong. Use *all right* instead.

a lot, alot

*A lot* is misspelled a lot. It's always two words.

a while, awhile

*Awhile* (one word) is an adverb that means "for a while." Use a while (two words) if "for a while" doesn't make sense.

Example

It might take me a while to learn the difference, but I'll think about it awhile to make sure that I get it.

capital, capitol

The building where a legislative assembly meets is a capitol. That is the only meaning of *capitol*. If you mean the city where the legislature meets, or if you're referring to money or other resources or to anything else, use *capital*. 
Example

In the state capital, the governor spoke of raising more capital for schools before he tripped and tumbled down the capitol steps.

Tip

One way to remember the difference:
A capitol is an office building.

compliment(ary), complement(ary)

A compliment is a form of praise; a complimentary remark is, too. And if it's free, as most praise is, it's complimentary.

A complement completes or supplements something. And two things that go well together are complementary.

Example

To thank you for your compliments concerning our cheeses, we're sending you a complimentary bottle of wine, which we hope you'll find complements the Gouda.

Tip

Remember that a complement completes or supplements.

continuous(ly), continual(ly)

Use continuous for anything that is uninterrupted; use continual for actions that recur regularly or frequently.

Example

Continual monitoring of the servers helps to ensure continuous operation of the website.

every day, everyday

Use every day when you mean "each and every day." Use everyday when you mean "ordinary."
Example

Find specialty and everyday items in our classifieds section every day.

Try substituting each day in the sentence, and if it sounds right, use every day.

farther, further
In American English, farther refers only to measurable distance. Further refers to time or degree. But in British English, it’s acceptable for both farther and further to refer to distance. The following example sentence uses farther and further as is customary in American English.

Example

He understood that to further his career in football, he’d have to throw the ball farther and faster.

fewer, less
Fewer refers to things that can be counted, such as flowers. Use less or less than for things that cannot be counted individually, such as flour.

Exception: People commonly use less than with time, distance, and money, even when talking about countable units like hours or dollars, because in such cases the amount of time, distance, or money is considered a single unit.

Examples

She was able to process the entries faster because there were fewer of them than before.
The grammarian was pleasantly surprised to see that the checkout sign said "10 items or fewer."
He has less muscle now than when he started running.
We were less than 20 kilometers from the shore when it happened. (Distance exception)
Calm down! I took less than 10 dollars from your pocket. (Money exception)
**historic, historical**
Something that is significant in history is historic; something that merely occurs in history or relates to history is historical.

**Example**
Uncle George likes to entertain us with his knowledge of little-known historical facts, but his favorite story is about the time corn prices soared to historic heights in the 1970s and he could have retired a rich man.

**it's, its**
It's is a contraction of it is; the apostrophe replaces a letter. Its is a possessive adjective like his, her, or your; and possessive adjectives never include an apostrophe.

**Example**
It's the first time the company has raised its prices.

**TIP**
Try substituting it is in the sentence. If that sounds right, use it's.

**lay, lie**
Both words have a multitude of meanings and can be verbs or nouns. But they are most often confused when referring to putting oneself to rest (lie) and putting something down or placing something (lay). Idioms for both words abound, so check the dictionary to be sure you're using the correct word.

**Example**
Lay down your drink before you lie down for a nap.

**TIP**
Remember that a bricklayer lays bricks.
let's, lets

Let’s is a contraction of let us; the apostrophe replaces a letter. Lets means “allows.”

Example

Let’s see if this password lets us log in.

maybe, may be

If you mean “perhaps,” use maybe; otherwise, use the verb may be.

Example

This may be the best team ever! Maybe it has a shot at the title.

peak, peek

A peak is a pinnacle, top, or summit. A peek is a quick or furtive look.

Example

Take a sneak peek at how celebrities stay in peak condition.

premier, premiere

Premier can be an adjective (meaning “first,” either in rank or in time) or a noun (another word for prime minister). Premiere means to “debut something” or refers to the debut itself.

Example

The company will premiere its luxury hybrid at the auto show. The much-anticipated car is expected to be the premier offering in its class, surpassing even the entry from Rolls-Royce.

principal, principle

Principal refers to a person or thing of the highest rank or importance. Principle refers to law or doctrine.
Example

The students showed the principal the 10 principles of behavior that were the principal reasons for the protest.

Tip

Many U.S. schoolchildren learn that “the principal is your pal.” The word to use when referring to the top administrator of a school ends in pal. So does the word meaning “the top person or thing.”

reign, rein

A monarch reigns, but you rein in a horse using its reins.

Example

During his reign as manager, he tried to rein in the players’ salaries. When that failed, he gave the negotiators free rein.

rite, right

Though both words have several meanings, rite is generally used to mean “a ceremonial or customary act.” If you don’t mean that, use right.

Example

Graduation parties are an annual rite, and many seniors seem to think it’s their right to have one. To them, it’s a rite of passage, but I don’t think they’re right.

See “Words that may confuse readers” on page 330 for a caution about using right.

stationary, stationery

If it’s not moving, it’s stationary. Unless it’s the paper you write on; then it’s stationery. Stationary is an adjective; stationery is a noun.

Example

The exercise equipment manufacturer’s logo—a stationary bike—appears on the corporate stationery.
A tip is written on stationery.

**that, which**

In the U.S., use *that* to introduce a *restrictive clause*—one that’s essential to the meaning of the sentence: *This is the house that Jack built.* If you cut *that Jack built,* the sentence would lose its point.

Use *which* to introduce a *nonrestrictive clause*—one that can be removed from the sentence without changing the sentence’s essential meaning: *This house, which Jack built, is the one I want to buy.* Here, *which Jack built* is an aside—you could remove it from the sentence without changing the key point.

Nonrestrictive clauses begin with *which* and are set off by commas—think of the commas as dotted lines marking where you can cut.

**Examples**

Do not respond to any message that asks for your password.
Do not respond to David's email messages, which ask for more money each time.

**Example**

**Before**
The tango school which closes during the ski season is Muriel’s main reason for visiting Buenos Aires. (*The clause “which closes during the ski season” should have commas on both sides if it is nonessential. Alternatively, “which” should be changed to “that” if the clause is essential—for example, if it’s necessary to distinguish this school from, say, a year-round tango school in Buenos Aires.*)

**After (nonessential)**
The tango school, which closes during the ski season, is Muriel’s main reason for visiting Buenos Aires. (*In this sentence, “which closes during the ski season” is nonessential—there is only one tango school that the reader could think of, so it isn’t necessary to distinguish it.*)

**After (essential)**
The tango school that closes during the ski season is Muriel’s main reason for visiting Buenos Aires. (*In this sentence, “that closes during the ski season” is essential—there must be another tango school that the reader could mistake for Muriel’s school of choice.*)
Garner's Modern American Usage offers the best tip for using *that* and *which* correctly: "If you see a *which* with neither a preposition nor a comma, dash, or parenthesis before it, it should probably be a *that.*" If that doesn't work, think about how the sentence sounds. If it sounds better with no pause before *that* or *which*, you probably want to use *that*.

**Example**

**Before**

We strive to provide readers with information which is accurate and up-to-date.

**After**

We strive to provide readers with information that is accurate and up-to-date.

Although U.S. writers use *that* for restrictive clauses (those that are essential to the meaning of the sentence), British writers frequently use *that* or *which* interchangeably. But for nonrestrictive (nonessential) clauses, British usage still requires a comma and *which*. (Note: In British usage, these are often called *defining* and *non-defining* clauses.)

**then, than**

If you're referring to time, or if you mean "therefore," "accordingly," or "next," use *then*. If you're making a comparison, use *than*.

**Example**

Download the second file (it's smaller than the first) and then open it.

**they're, their, there**

*They're* is a contraction of *they are*. *Their* is a possessive adjective like *his* or *her*. For everything else (and that's a lot), use *there*.

**Example**

They're filling out their forms over there.
who, which/that

For nonrestrictive clauses (those typically preceded by a comma), use who to refer to people. Use which to refer to an animal or a thing.

Example

The director, who has an unmistakable style, created “The Scream,” which had considerable impact.

For restrictive clauses (those not typically preceded by a comma), you can use who or that to refer to people. Some editors think that only who can refer to people, but in fact that has its place. For example, Fowler’s Dictionary of Modern English Usage notes that that works well to refer to generic or unknown individuals (for example, a man, anyone, no one).

Examples

Directors who engage our fears often meet with box-office success.
Who was it that said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself”? No one that I know would ever do such a thing.

Both who and which can take whose as the possessive form.

Example

The director, whose style is unmistakable, created “The Scream,” whose impact was considerable.

If you’re struggling to choose between who and whom, see “Choosing who or whom” on page 336.

who’s, whose

Who’s is a contraction of who is or who has. Whose is the possessive form of who or which.

Example

The customer, who’s always right, remembers whose table he was sitting at that fateful night.
**you're, your**

You're is a contraction of you are; the apostrophe replaces a letter. Your is the possessive form of you.

**Example**

Receive alerts on your mobile device when you're away from your desk.

**TIP**

If you've written you're, try substituting you are. If it doesn't work, the word you want is your.

**Other groups of words likely to be mistaken for each other** include the following (and many others). Look these up in your dictionary if you're ever in doubt about which one to use:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>accept/except</th>
<th>cache/cachet</th>
<th>foreword/forward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>adapt/adopt</td>
<td>callus/callous</td>
<td>gibe/jibe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adverse/averse</td>
<td>canvas/canvas</td>
<td>hawk/hock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aid/aide</td>
<td>carat/caret/karat</td>
<td>imply/infer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allude/elude</td>
<td>cast/caste</td>
<td>leach/leech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alternate/alternative</td>
<td>comprise/compose/consist of/constitute</td>
<td>lightening/lightning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ambivalent/ambiguous</td>
<td>cord/chord</td>
<td>nauseous/nauseated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appraise/appraise</td>
<td>council/counsel</td>
<td>palate/palette/pallet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>base/bass</td>
<td>discreet/discrete</td>
<td>pedal/peidle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beside/besides</td>
<td>elicit/illicit</td>
<td>precede/proceed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bloc/block</td>
<td>faze/phase</td>
<td>rack/wrack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>born/borne</td>
<td>flack/flak</td>
<td>tortuous/torturous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>breach/breach</td>
<td>forego/forgo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**TIP**

If research hasn't helped you feel sure that you've chosen the correct word, select another word that conveys what you're trying to say.

Finally, be aware of some common phrases that contain a homophone. Writers often confuse these:
- Vocal cords (not chords)
- Just deserts (not desserts)
- To the manner (not manor) born (Really! It's in Hamlet.)
- Soft-pedal (not peddle)
- Free rein (not reign)
- Shoo-in (not shoe-in)
- Toe (not tow) the line
- A real trouper (not trooper)

Of course, many such phrases are clichés that you'll want to avoid anyway.

Words that may confuse readers

Certain words, such as once, right, and since, have so many meanings that they can puzzle readers. They are particularly troublesome for translators and for readers whose first language isn't English. Think carefully before using them in a sentence.

once

Once can be a noun, an adjective, an adverb, or a conjunction. Because it can be used in so many ways, it can sometimes lead readers down an incorrect path. Depending on the context, consider substituting as soon as, one time, after, when, in the past, or formerly.

Examples

**Before**
Press the button once you have set up your pieces on the game board. Press it twice to reset the timer.

**After**
Set up your pieces on the game board, then press the button one time. Press it twice to reset the timer.

**Before**
Once you press the button, the computer will start up.

**After**
When you press the button, the computer will start up.
After you press the button, the computer will start up.
Before
Once he would press any button; now he knows that some will shock him.

After
In the past he would press any button; now he knows that some will shock him.

right
This word can refer to, among other things, a direction (turn right), a political point of view (the right opposes that tax), or a legal claim (the right to free speech); or it can mean “correct.” If you mean “correct,” then use correct. And if you mean “right” as in a direction, make sure that people know exactly where you mean.

Example

Before
After locating the right file in the right pane, drag it to the left pane.

After
After locating the correct file in the pane at right, drag the file to the pane at left.

since
Since can relate to either time or causation. If you mean “because,” you may want to use because instead—or you might reword the sentence for greater clarity.

Example

Before
Since she was 4 years old, Eleanor enjoyed dressing up in tutus and pretending to be a ballerina. *(The simple past “enjoyed” may indicate to careful readers that “Since” means “because” here, but many readers may miss that detail.)*

Since she was 4 years old, Eleanor has enjoyed dressing up in tutus and pretending to be a ballerina. *(The present perfect “has enjoyed” may indicate to careful readers that “Since” means “ever since,” but again, many readers may miss that detail.)*

After
Because she was 4 years old, Eleanor enjoyed dressing up in tutus and pretending to be a ballerina.
Eleanor has enjoyed dressing up in tutus and pretending to be a ballerina even since she was 4 years old.

Frequently misspelled words

The following words are some of the most difficult to spell—even excellent spellers have trouble with some of them.

Some words (like minuscule) have a variant spelling (miniscule). When your dictionary's main entry for a word offers multiple spellings, it's wise to choose the first one.

For even more words that are frequently misspelled, refer to The Gregg Reference Manual, pages 211–213.

| accommodate | government | mischievous |
| accumulate  | grammar    | misspell    |
| allotted    | harass     | necessary   |
| amateur     | height     | noticeable  |
| calendar    | hierarchy  | occurrence  |
| cemetery    | immediately| parallel    |
| changeable  | independent| pastime    |
| collectible | indispensable| perseverance |
| commitment  | inoculate  | privilege   |
| committee   | irrelevant | publicly    |
| conscientious| judgment | questionnaire |
| conscious   | liaison    | restaurant  |
| definitely  | license    | rhythm      |
| embarrass   | maintenance | seize     |
| existence   | memento    | separate    |
| fluorescent | millennium | supersede   |
| gauge       | minuscule  | withhold    |

Common grammatical mistakes

It's true that prose is less formal today, but you should still follow most grammatical rules. Adhering to them eases reader comprehension and increases the credibility of your website.
If you don't feel confident in this arena, take heart: You're not alone. Here are eight common trouble areas and commonsense ways to deal with them.

1. Mismatched subject and verb: We goes to school

The rule: Singular subjects should have singular verbs; plural subjects should have plural verbs: one frog jumps, two frogs jump.

Of course, it's not always that easy. Pronouns such as each and nobody, especially, tend to confuse everyone.

**Example**

**Before**
Each of the programmers have an extensive collection of free, software-promoting T-shirts.

**After**
Each of the programmers has an extensive collection of free, software-promoting T-shirts.

Use this chart to match pronouns with their correct verbs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronoun</th>
<th>Singular or plural verb?</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anybody</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>Has anybody seen my pillow?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>Both of us need a nap.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>Each of us needs a nap.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>Everyone needs a nap.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few</td>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>Few of the adults need a nap.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most</td>
<td>Plural when referring to a greater number; singular when referring to a greater part</td>
<td>Most of the babies are napping. Most of the class is napping.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>Much has been made of circadian rhythms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nobody</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>Nobody naps long.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Choosing the correct verb after *and, or, or nor*

Many grammar books go into excruciating detail about matching subject and verb when the subject is a compound consisting of two or more elements separated by *or* or *nor*. There is only one rule for *or* and *nor*: **The verb must agree in number and person with the subject closer to it.** Believe it or not, the sentences in the following example are correct.

#### Examples

Either she or I am going to win the auction.

Either Mary or you are going to win the auction.

Neither she nor I am going to win the auction.

Neither Mary nor you are going to win the auction.

---

Because the grammatically correct verb may sound awkward, consider changing the verb or verb tense when the subjects are joined by *or* or *nor*.

#### Examples

Either she or I will win the auction.

Either Mary or you will win the auction.

Neither she nor I will win the auction.

Neither Mary nor you will win the auction.

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronoun</th>
<th>Singular or plural verb?</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>Plural when meaning &quot;not any&quot;;</td>
<td>None of the babies are awake yet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>singular when meaning &quot;not one&quot;</td>
<td>None of the babies is awake yet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>No one is awake yet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somebody</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>Somebody needs a nap.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>Someone is snoring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Either (without or)</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>Either is fine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither (without nor)</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>Neither is ideal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Either (with or)</td>
<td>Singular or plural, depending on what follows or</td>
<td>See &quot;Choosing the correct verb after and, or, or nor&quot; below.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither (with nor)</td>
<td>Singular or plural, depending on what follows nor</td>
<td>See &quot;Choosing the correct verb after and, or, or nor&quot; below.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For a **compound subject formed with and**, your verb choice depends on whether the nouns are functioning as one thing (singular verb) or as two or more things (plural verb).

**Examples**

Steamed mussels and French fries go surprisingly well together. *(Plural subject, plural verb.)*

Mussels and fries is the best dish on the menu. *("Mussels and fries" functions as a single unit—a dish—and so takes a singular verb.)*

**Exception:** When a positive subject is joined to a negative subject by and, the verb agrees with the positive subject: *Compassion and not monetary riches is her main criterion for a husband.*

**Collective nouns**

In the U.S., **collective nouns such as team, group, band, and company generally take singular verbs.** In the U.K., singular words that refer to groups of people usually take plural pronouns and verbs.

**Examples**

**American English**

The band fights constantly on its tour bus.

The company is announcing its third-quarter results later today.

**British English**

The band fight constantly on their tour bus.

The company are announcing their third-quarter results later today.

**TIP** The rule to always treat *data* and *media* as the plurals of *datum* and *medium* (and to give them plural verbs: *the data are, the media are*) is becoming less stringent a “rule.” In communications and technology publications, *data* and *media* are often treated as singular nouns: *the data is, the media is.* For more information, see these terms’ individual entries in “The Yahoo! word list” on page 438.
One of the nouns that/who

One of the rules that often trip people up is this one. In the sentence you just read, don’t mistake One as the subject of the verb trip, the subject of the verb trip is that, the pronoun standing for rules. (One is the subject of the verb is.)

**Examples**

**Before**

One of the rules that often trips people up is this one.

**After**

One of the rules that often trip people up is this one.

**Before**

Be one of those writers who practices good grammar.

**After**

Be one of those writers who practice good grammar.

2. Pronoun decisions: I or me? Who or whom?

Sometimes people get confused when two or more pronouns are used together. Is it her and me, she and I, or her and I? The rule is:

- Use *I*, *he*, *she*, *we*, or *they* for the subject or (if you’re using formal English) after any conjugated form of the verb to be: *It was she who spoke first*. A conjugated form is any form other than the infinitive (to be) itself.

- Use *me*, *him*, *her*, *us*, or *them* for the object of a verb, for the object of a preposition (such as about, of, to, or with), or after the infinitive to be: *I’ve got to be me*.

It’s easy to get confused. Even die-hard grammarians use a simple trick to select the correct pronouns: **Break up the sentence and try it with each pronoun individually**.

**Example**

She and I were surprised by her popularity. (*She was surprised and I was surprised.*)
Example

Before
It was a surprise to she and I. ("It was a surprise to she" and "It was a surprise to I": Both sound—and are—incorrect.)
It was a surprise to her and I. ("It was a surprise to her" is correct but "It was a surprise to I" sounds—and is—incorrect.)

After
It was a surprise to her and me. (It was a surprise to her and it was a surprise to me.)

Choosing who or whom

Who and whom are two special pronouns that often confound writers—if they consider them at all. Use who as a subject and use whom as the object of a verb or preposition.

When faced with selecting between who and whom, don’t panic. The following tips will help you figure out which one to use. And if all else fails, use who.

One trick for finding the correct form is to recast the sentence in your mind, substituting he and him for who or whom. If him sounds correct, use whom. (It also helps to remember that both him and whom end in m.)

Examples

He is the youngest of those who finished the race. (Substituting “he”: He finished.)

Smith, who they suspected was cheating, won the prize. (Substituting “he”: They suspected he was cheating.)

Who shall I say is calling? (Substituting “he”: Shall I say he is calling?)

To whom should I give the prize? (Substituting “him”: Should I give the prize to him?)

Please give this to whoever won the prize. (Substituting “he”: He won the prize.)

Sometimes it’s better to just rewrite a sentence to avoid a potential grammatical error or a grammatically correct but awkward or formal-sounding construction. It’s especially true when who or whom starts a sentence. Who generally sounds correct at the beginning of a sentence, but it isn’t always correct.
Example

Before
Whom should I give the ticket to? *(Grammatically correct but awkward-sounding)*

After
Who should receive the ticket? *(Grammatically correct and natural-sounding)*

Matching nouns and pronouns

Remember that **singular nouns take singular pronouns, and plural nouns take plural pronouns**. In the U.S., *company* is a singular noun: *The company is announcing its third-quarter results.*

When discussing an individual, use a singular pronoun: *Tell that man that he dropped his wallet.* Unfortunately, this rule can mean choosing between *he* and *she* even when the gender of the individual is unknown or unimportant, because using *they* is grammatically controversial. Try rewriting the sentence instead. *(For techniques on maintaining good grammar without resorting to such awkward constructions as *he or she* and *s/he*, see “Write gender-neutral copy” on page 77.)*

Example

Before
When a reader sees a singular subject, they expect to see a singular pronoun.

After
When readers see a singular subject, they expect to see a singular pronoun.

Make sure that you pair nouns and pronouns clearly. For example, when you use the pronoun *it*, can you tell what it refers to? If not, fix the problem by repeating the noun, inserting a noun, or, if the repetition sounds too awkward, rewriting the sentence.

Examples

Before
Noah swung a champagne bottle at his model ship and broke it.

After
Noah swung a champagne bottle at his model ship and broke the ship.

or

Noah swung a champagne bottle at his model ship and broke the bottle.
Better
Noah broke a champagne bottle on his model ship.

Before
She knows the names of her friends' kids, but she doesn't like them.

After
She knows the names of her friends' kids, but she doesn't like the kids.

or
She knows the names of her friends' kids, but she doesn't like their names.

Better
She knows the names of her friends' kids, but she thinks that the names are old-fashioned.

3. Dangling and misplaced modifiers: The funny side of grammar

A modifier is a word or phrase that changes or qualifies the meaning of another word or phrase. **Place modifiers as close as possible to the words they refer to.** If you don't, your sentences may say something you never intended—sometimes with unintentionally funny results.

Dangling modifiers

A dangling modifier is a word or phrase (often at the beginning of a sentence) that seems to modify a noun it isn't supposed to. Sometimes the dangling modifier is too far away from the noun it is supposed to modify, or the noun that it's supposed to modify isn't even in the sentence.

You can often fix a dangling modifier simply by placing the noun it is supposed to modify right after it.

**Examples**

Before
Using the grammar checker, grammatical errors are detected and corrected easily.

(The errors are using the grammar checker.)
After
Using the grammar checker, you can detect and correct grammatical errors easily.
(You are using the grammar checker.)

Before
Walking by the restaurant, it would be easy to dismiss it as an '80s yuppie fern bar.
(No one in the sentence is walking.)

After
Walking by the restaurant, you might easily dismiss it as an '80s yuppie fern bar.
or
Walking by the restaurant, a person might easily dismiss it as an '80s yuppie fern bar.

Sometimes you need to recast the sentence to associate the correct noun with the modifier.

Examples

Before
Drunk or sober, the coach wants all the players on the field right now. (Presumably, the coach is not the person whose sobriety is questionable. The modifier "Drunk or sober" should go close to "players" instead.)

After
The coach wants all the players—drunk or sober—on the field right now.

Before
When executed properly, the skater will complete three and a half rotations in a triple axel. (The skater is executed.)

After
The skater completes three and a half rotations in a properly executed triple axel.
(The axel is executed.)

Dangling modifiers don't always fall at the beginning of a sentence—they may fall at the end.

Be careful in particular with prepositional phrases. These can modify either nouns or verbs and may therefore puzzle readers. A prepositional phrase includes a preposition (such as at, on, above, between, with, for, into, through, out, off, toward) and an object.
Examples

Before
Did you see the cowboy on the palomino with a ten-gallon hat? (Was the cowboy or the horse wearing the hat?)

After
Did you see the cowboy with a ten-gallon hat on the palomino? (Better, but readers still might think that the palomino is wearing a hat.)

Better
Did you see the cowboy with a ten-gallon hat who was riding the palomino?

Before
The dancer leaped across the stage with scarves and ribbons flying. (Is “with scarves and ribbons flying” describing the stage’s decorations or the dancer’s?)

After
With scarves and ribbons flying from her hands, the dancer leaped across the stage.

Misplaced modifiers

The placement of a modifier, whether it’s a word or a phrase, affects the meaning or emphasis of a sentence. Always place a modifier as close as possible to the word it modifies. A misplaced modifier inadvertently modifies the wrong word and hampers understanding.

Be especially careful with the adverbs only and just—they can modify nouns, verbs, and other parts of speech.

Examples

We will only notify you when there is a change. (We won’t do anything else.)
We will notify you only when there is a change. (We won’t notify you for any other reason.)

Mary only poked him in the eye. (That’s all she did; no punching, no biting.)
Only Mary poked him in the eye. (Nobody else poked him.)
Mary poked only him in the eye. (She didn’t poke anybody else.)
Mary poked him in the only eye. (And now he has none.)
Generally, place only where it belongs: right before the word or phrase it applies to.

If you include a modifier before a series, make sure that it's clear whether that modifier belongs with the first word in the series or with them all. You may need to reorder the series or to rewrite the sentence.

**Example**

**Before**
The cafeteria’s menu includes peanut-free granola, salads, and cookies. *(Are all the items peanut-free?)*

**After**
The cafeteria’s menu includes salads, cookies, and peanut-free granola. *(Reorder the series to clarify.)*

or

The cafeteria’s menu lists several peanut-free foods, including granola, salads, and cookies. *(Rewrite the sentence to make it clear that all the items are peanut-free.)*

**4. Parallelism: Matching, balancing, making sense**

Parallelism, broadly speaking, refers to matching the parts of speech (all verbs, for instance) in certain related parts of a sentence—for example, in a series or list.

**Example**

**Not parallel**
Sun-min likes traveling, reading, and wants to climb more mountains. *(“Traveling” and “reading” are both gerunds, but “wants to climb” doesn’t fit.)*

**Parallel**
Sun-min likes traveling, reading, and mountain climbing.

or
Sun-min, who likes traveling and reading, wants to climb more mountains.
A sentence that is parallel is easy to read. A sentence that is not parallel may make the reader stumble or even backtrack to figure out what you were trying to say.

Parallel structure around and, or, and other conjunctions

And—like the other coordinating conjunctions but, or, nor, and yet—signals a need for parallel treatment. For example, a romance novelist might give the hero of her story:

- A verb followed by two prepositional phrases: Jake swept through the plains and into her heart.
- A verb and two objects: He excited her mind and her dog.
- Two verbs: He rode hard and drank infrequently.
- Two adjectives: He was dark and tidy.

Any elements joined by conjunctions should take the same grammatical form.

Examples

**Before**
She is a team player, well-organized, and represents our company well.
(What's wrong with that sentence? It says "She is a well-organized" and "She is a represents our company well.")

**After**
She is a team player, she is well-organized, and she represents our company well.

**Better**
A team player and a well-organized executive, she represents our company well.

**Before**
BuggleBox allows you to upload video, create playlists, and makes it easy to share playlists with friends.

**After**
BuggleBox allows you to upload video, create playlists, and share playlists with friends.

**Better**
With BuggleBox you can upload video, create playlists, and share playlists with friends.

Correlative conjunctions such as not only—but also, either—or, neither—nor, both—and, and as-so also signal a need for parallel treatment.
Quick grammar glossary

**conjunction:** A word that joins two parts of a sentence. *And, but, or, and nor* are common conjunctions. Many other words can also serve as conjunctions, including *how, when, once, since, and because.*

**correlative conjunction:** A pair of conjunctions that are not adjacent to each other but that connect a pair of nouns, verbs, prepositional phrases, or clauses in a sentence. *Either-or, neither-nor, both-and, as-so,* and *not only-but also* are common correlatives.

**prepositional phrase:** A phrase beginning with a preposition (such as *to, from, on, for, about, or with*) that is followed by a noun or noun phrase (its object).

**object:** A noun, pronoun, or clause that receives the action of a verb or that follows a preposition.

Sentences with correlatives are like seesaws: To stay in balance, the word or phrase following the first part of the correlative conjunction (for example, following *neither*) must be the same part of speech as the word or phrase following the second part (for example, following *nor*). Constructions like “That’s neither here nor there” and “We aim to win not only their hearts but also their minds” illustrate this principle.

**Try reading the sentence as two separate sentences,** each with a joined element. For the first sentence, take the beginning of the original sentence (up until the first word of the correlative, such as *either*) plus the bit in between the two correlatives (for example, in between *either* and *or*). For the second sentence, take the same beginning of the sentence, but now add the bit following the second part of the correlative (for example, following *or*). If the two resulting sentences are grammatically and syntactically correct, you’ve placed the correlatives correctly.

**Example**

Try this technique with the sentence “Flower arrangements are either delivered to home addresses or to office addresses.” If you split this sentence, you’d get:

⇒ Flower arrangements are delivered to home addresses.
⇒ Flower arrangements are to office addresses.

**Before**

Flower arrangements are (either) delivered to home addresses (or) to office addresses

(Not good. The second sentence is missing a verb, “delivered,” and it doesn’t make sense—so the correlative is not parallel.)
To make the sentence structure parallel, move delivered before either so that it can apply to both halves of the correlative. The phrase after either is now parallel to the phrase after or: “Flower arrangements are delivered either to home addresses or to office addresses.” If you split this sentence, you’d get:

→ Flower arrangements are delivered to home addresses.
→ Flower arrangements are delivered to office addresses.

After

Flower arrangements are delivered (either) to home addresses (or) to office addresses

(Now the sentence structure is parallel.)

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**Example**

**Before**
The funds will either be debited from your account when the check is issued or when the payee cashes the check.

**After**
The funds will be debited from your account either when the check is issued or when the payee cashes the check.

Take special care with the correlative conjunction not only— but also. One of the two elements (the not only or the but also) is frequently misplaced or used incompletely. But using this correlative correctly can sometimes produce a sentence that sounds stilted. If that is the case, consider rewriting the sentence.

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**Example**

**Before**
You can change not only your password but your email address.

**After**
You can change not only your password but also your email address.

**Better**
You can change your password and your email address.
**TIP** Occasionally, *but* by itself rather than *but also* is appropriate. This occurs when the first part of the conjunction is a member, or an example, of the second part. In the declaration "I sampled not only the Brie but *also* all the cheeses," Brie does not seem to be a cheese. "I sampled not only the Brie but *all the cheeses*" makes sense, and so does "I sampled not only the Brie but also the grapes." (Note that the idea of *also* can be worded as *too* or as *as well*. You could say, "I sampled not only the Brie but the grapes as well."*)

**Nonparallel lists**

Mistakes in parallelism appear frequently in vertical lists, where they are even more obvious than in running text. When you create a bulleted or numbered list, make sure not only that each item in the list follows smoothly from the phrase that introduces the list, but also that all the items in the list take the same grammatical form (noun, verb, and so on).

**Examples**

**Before**

On yesterday's show I learned:
- How to cook a turkey (*a conjunction with an infinitive "to" phrase*)
- The essentials of flower arrangement (*a noun phrase*)
- To save bread-wrapper twists (*an infinitive phrase*)

**After (using all conjunctions with infinitive phrases)**

On yesterday's show I learned:
- How to cook a turkey
- How to arrange flowers
- What to do with bread-wrapper twists

**After (using all noun phrases)**

On yesterday's show I learned:
- The best way to cook a turkey
- The essentials of flower arrangement
- Great uses for bread-wrapper twists
5. Change of person: Sliding from second to third

Writing in the first person means using I or we; in the second person, you; in the third person, he, she, or it—as well as customer, subscriber, member, user.

If you’re referring to your reader as you, whether explicitly or implicitly, don’t switch to the third person. It’s disorienting. For instance, don’t use you and the customer interchangeably in the same text.

**Example**

**Before**
Sign up for our mailing list and be notified of the latest releases and deals. In addition, subscribers are eligible to enter our weekly drawing. *(The subject of the first sentence—an implied “you”—is in the second person; the subject in the next sentence—“subscribers”—is in the third person.)*

**After**
Sign up for our mailing list and be notified of the latest releases and deals. You’ll also be eligible to enter our weekly drawing. *(The subject throughout—“you”—is in the second person.)*

Avoid using the imperative (which has an implied subject of “you”) with the first person. This type of construction leads to unclear text that can prevent the reader from immediately understanding your message.

**Example**

**Before**
Check the box to hide my contact information from other users. *(Uses both the second person “you,” implied by the imperative, and the first person, implied by “my.”)*

**After**
Check the box to hide your contact information from others. *(Uses the second person consistently)*
I want to hide my contact information from others. *(Uses the first person consistently)*
6. Change of tense: Back to the future

Past, present, future—which tense is appropriate for your copy? The present tense works best for most business communications, but each tense has its place. In an essay about Jane Eyre or a blog entry about the book you just read, you'd refer to characters and action in the present tense, because those works exist in the present. But in a newspaper report, you'd refer to last week's political convention in the past tense.

Regardless of the tense you choose, **don't change it midsentence (or midparagraph)**—you'll give your reader temporal whiplash.

**Example**

**Before (present, future)**

Visitors to the outdoor museum enjoy beautiful weather most days and quick access from the train station. On display will be artifacts from the archaeological dig, centuries-old frescoes, and a partially unearthed coliseum.

**After (present)**

Visitors to the outdoor museum enjoy beautiful weather most days and quick access from the train station. On display are artifacts from the archaeological dig, centuries-old frescoes, and a partially unearthed coliseum.

7. The superfluous as: Much as we like it, it has to go

It's true that comparisons such as "She was as silly as a goose" require the use of as twice: once before the first element (silly), and once before the second (a goose). But in constructions like As silly as she was, the first as is incorrect, because no comparison is being made. The second as means "though": Silly though she was, or Silly as she was, is correct. So, difficult as it may be, **leave out that first as**.

**Example**

**Before**

As much as I liked her performance, I felt the play itself lacked energy.

**After**

Much as I liked her performance, I felt the play itself lacked energy.
8. False comparisons: Mismatched pairs

Sometimes a word or phrase is missing from a comparison, which results in constructions like Unlike last week, box-office receipts this week were higher than expected. The writer intends to compare this week's receipts with last week's receipts, but that sentence compares receipts with last week.

Make sure that comparisons are between two comparable subjects—in this case, a week and another week: Unlike last week, this week saw higher-than-expected box-office receipts.

Example

Before
Unlike Mr. Straw's performance in the film, the play featured an actor less skilled in physical comedy.

After
Unlike the film, which showcased Mr. Straw's gift for physical comedy, the play featured an actor less skilled in that arena.

or
Unlike Mr. Straw, who starred in the film, the play's lead doesn't have a gift for physical comedy.

Old "rules" that no longer apply

Quick! Name three important grammar rules:

1. Never split an infinitive.
2. Never end a sentence with a preposition.
3. Never start a sentence with a conjunction.

Wrong. Following these old saws can lead to unnatural or unnecessarily formal language.

1. Splitting infinitives

An infinitive is the to form of a verb; for example, to go, to download, and to subscribe are all infinitives. A split infinitive places an adverb between to and the principal verb, as in the Star Trek line "to boldly go where no one has gone before."

People object to splitting infinitives for various reasons. One common argument is that to is an
Avoiding the Infinities

The essential part of the verb—the infinitive is two words functioning as one and therefore should not be divided. However, the objection to split infinitives is at best a preference, not a rule; there’s no linguistic reason why inserting an adverb is incorrect. In fact, it is sometimes necessary to split an infinitive to add emphasis in the right place, to produce a more natural rhythm, or to reduce ambiguity by placing the adverb next to the verb it modifies. Your best course of action is to say a phrase out loud both ways—to faithfully execute and to execute faithfully, for example—and decide which construction sounds better, clearer, and more appropriate.

Examples

To quickly go to the homepage, click the icon.
You can expect to more than double your sales.

Tip

Many people who object to split infinitives also get worked up when writers separate helper verbs from main verbs. But again, you should let your ear guide you: in the finals, Spain will easily defeat Brazil sounds more natural than Spain easily will defeat Brazil. And Spain will defeat Brazil easily falls somewhere in between—it sounds natural enough, but easily loses some of its emphasis when moved farther from the verb.

2. Ending with a preposition

At one time, writers took great care to avoid ending a sentence with a preposition (a word such as at, about, of, in, with, by, for, or from). It was something at which they worked hard. Unfortunately, they created sentences like the previous one, which doesn’t reflect common speech.

Examples

Before
This is the service for which you’ve been waiting.

After
This is the service you’ve been waiting for.

Before
That’s exactly the subject about which we’re talking!
After
That’s exactly what we’re talking about!

Ending a sentence with a preposition is fine in casual and informal writing. For more formal writing, you may want to avoid ending a sentence with a preposition. But instead of using stilted language that doesn’t reflect common speech, try rewriting the sentence.

**Example**

**Before**
Contact the seller if you don’t receive the item for which you have paid.
("For which" is a slightly unnatural-sounding construction used to avoid ending the sentence with “for")

**After**
Contact the seller if you don’t receive the item you bought.
or
Contact the seller if you don’t receive the item.
or
If you don’t receive the item you paid for, contact the seller.

**3. Starting with a conjunction**

Most authorities now accept a coordinating conjunction (like and, but, and or) as the opening to a sentence in informal writing—but not all. And those who don’t have their reasons: Words like and and but are technically meant to join two clauses of a complete sentence. Some people feel that beginning a sentence with one of these words creates a sentence fragment, or only half a thought. But you’ll have to consider your site’s voice and decide for yourself.

If your website’s voice is highly professional and formal, you may want to use language and grammar more conservatively—especially if your readers are self-proclaimed sticklers who might think that you’re making mistakes rather than purposely ignoring outdated rules. In that case, re-write sentences to avoid unnatural language.
Ideas in Practice

Exercise: Dig into the details

Each of the following sentences has one or more grammar, spelling, or usage mistakes. See if you can dig up all 20.

1. Since Carla got her urban garden allotment, she has been able to grow al lot of to- matoes and okra.

2. Your embarassing everyone with your sloppy typing, bad grammar, and with stub- bornly refusing to use a spell-checker.

3. Both of the twins are taking driving lessons, but neither Anya nor Alexei have driven further than the airport yet.

4. The person which first wrote a computer program was Ada Lovelace, who beside being Lord Byron's daughter created an algorithm for calculating Bernoulli numbers with Charles Babbage's analytical engine.

5. Looking at the length of Darnell's beard, his wife has been out of town for two weeks, I'd guess.

6. If Sean wants to join a sports team, his mom will let him play anything that doesn't require padding, so he could think about either playing tennis or rugby.

7. If you don't pack each of those collectable teacups in bubble wrap, you will defi- nately end up with a box of worthless shards.

8. He'd rather take vitamins then eat fruit and vegetables everyday.

9. Kendra is obsessed with that film and wants to see everything: the sneak peaks at the principle photography, Cannes premier, and DVD extras.

10. Eric says he's buying a pass to the "Star Trek" convention—the ticket price doesn't phase him.