

Grammar Dos and Don'ts

Commonly Misused Words

Below is a list of words to watch out for:

Affect vs. Effect

Affect is usually a verb, and effect is usually a noun. To affect something is to change or influence it, and an effect is something that happens due to a cause. (Affect as a verb can also mean, "to put on a pretense.") When you affect something, it produces an effect. Here are examples of the words used correctly in these senses:

*The tsunami ravaged the area, **affecting** many locals and tourists alike.*
(influenced, had an effect)

*She **affected** a cheery disposition.* (put on a pretense)

Gauging the tsunami's **effect** will require a look at the post-tragedy tourism numbers.

(Note that effect is also a verb, more rarely, meaning, "to cause to happen, bring about, achieve a final result," e.g. **effect** a change. And affect can be a noun, also more rarely, meaning (in psychology) "the conscious subjective aspect of an emotion considered apart from bodily changes; also: a set of observable manifestations of a subjectively experienced emotion," e.g., She had a flat **affect**.)

Compliment vs. Complement

A compliment is a pleasantry, an expression of goodwill, admiration, or respect. As a verb, it means, "to pay someone a compliment." On the other hand, complement means "to complete or to fit well together with."

*He **complimented** my typing skills. Bob and Jill **complement** one another beautifully as business partners.*

A fine wine will likewise complement a meal, in that it will go well with a meal; wine is not gifted with the power of speech so it's unable to give a meal a compliment.

Its vs. It's

Its is a possessive pronoun; it's is a contraction of it is: **It's** certain to reach **its** peak today.

Literally

Technically, something is literally true if it is actually true; literally is the opposite of metaphorically or figuratively. So if you say "I am so happy, I am literally walking on air," what (many people will think) you mean is that you are so happy that your body is now violating the law of gravity and your feet are no longer in contact with the ground. It is better to say figuratively or to leave out literally altogether.

Than vs. Then

Than is a conjunction used in comparisons; then is an adverb denoting time.

*That pizza is more **than** I can eat. Tom laughed, and **then** we recognized him.*

There vs. Their vs. They're

There is an adverb specifying place; it is also what's called (in syntax) an "expletive" (a word that performs a syntactic role but contributes nothing to meaning):

Adverb: *Sylvia is lying **there** unconscious.*

Expletive: **There** are two plums left.

Their is a possessive pronoun: *Fred and Jane finally washed **their** car.*

They're is a contraction of they are: **They're** later than usual today.

To vs. Too vs. Two

To is a preposition; too is an adverb; two is a number: **Too** many of your shots slice **to** the left, but the last **two** were right on the mark.

Your vs. You're

Your is a possessive pronoun; you're is a contraction of you are: **You're** going to catch a cold if you don't wear **your** coat.

Dangling Modifiers

A modifier is a word or clause that modifies or adds description to the subject of a sentence. A somewhat common mistake, though, is modifying the wrong thing in a sentence. For example: **Searching** through her handbag, **the sunglasses** escaped detection. The previous sentence suggests that the sunglasses were searching through the bag. Here's the correct way to write it: ***Searching** through her handbag, **she** was unable to find her sunglasses.*

Punctuation

Commas

A few rules for comma usage:

Use it to divide items in a list of three or more items: *Have you met **Abraham, Martin, and John?***

Use before for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so (mnemonic: FANBOYS) when connecting two sentences: *She ran as fast as her body would let her, **yet** it wasn't enough.*

When connecting sentences without the words above, use a semicolon instead: *She ran as fast as her body would let **her; it** wasn't enough.*

Commas can be used in a similar way to parentheses (used for asides, clarifications, or commentary) or dashes — which are used to spotlight what's between them — but when you don't want to break the flow. (See <http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/dashes-parentheses-and-commas>)

*She smashed her feet on the pavement, **not realizing the damage she was doing,** in an effort to win.*

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are only used to show **possession** (with nouns) and **contractions**: *the man's jacket, the boys' meeting, Charles's (or Charles') hat, the Joneses' house can't (for cannot), isn't (for is not), you're (for you are), it's (for it is), the '90s (for the 1990s)*

Apostrophes are never* used for plurals! *Except for single letters: mind your p's and q's; dot your i's. Examples: ***Oreos, avocados, tomatoes, 1960s, TVs, ICBMs, iPods, dos, don'ts***

Apostrophes are never used for verbs! Examples: *goes, says, watches, needs*

Apostrophes are not used in possessive pronouns (although their use with possessive nouns would make you think so): *yours, its, hers, his, ours, theirs*

When in doubt — don't use an apostrophe. For a fun look at apostrophe use, see: <http://theoatmeal.com/comics/apostrophe>

Quotation Marks

In American written English, periods and commas go inside the quotation marks. Everywhere else in the world, though, they go outside the quotation marks. E.g., **US:** “*word.*” / “*word,*” vs. **UK, etc.:** “*word*”. / “*word*”,

(As for the quotes themselves: Quoting someone in your story is good; quoting someone saying basic facts is not. The key to a good quote is when someone gives an opinion on something. But give the factual info yourself.)

Numbers

Write out the numbers zero to nine. Anything above nine gets the actual numeral, except when used in an inexact sense: *He invited 12 people. A thousand showed up.*

Pronouns

Subject pronouns (doing the action): I, you, she, he, it, we, they

Object pronouns (receiving the action): me, you, her, him, it, us, them

Not OK: **Me and my friends** had a good time. OK: **My friends and I** had a good time. (It is customary to always mention other people first.) Exception: Who's there? **Me.** It's **me.**

Words that end in “-one,” “-body,” or “-thing” are singular. For other indefinite pronouns (each, either, few, all, none, many, etc.), see <http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000027.htm>.

Everyone **is** welcome. Everybody **needs** to have her own equipment.