

Grammar Hit List

or

Mistakes to Die For

These mistakes are very bad, since you're supposed to have corrected them in middle and high school. Since they are easy to correct (you just have to remember them and proofread carefully; eventually your habits will change), they seriously damage your grade. They represent sub-college level writing.

The vocabulary required to understand my corrections is also simple—you should learn it: parts of speech, the terminology of verb tense and person, and the function of words in a sentence (e.g., subject/object). Learning this vocabulary for writing is like learning the parts of an engine in order to do automotive repair.

Most of these are EAR mistakes: that is, the words sound the same in conversation, or they're not pronounced clearly. But you can't write them like you hear them.

As with all writing, reading helps. You get used to seeing the correct forms, and you tend to replicate them when you write.

You can find many more of these mistakes in usage in the "Usage" sections of most composition/grammar handbooks. I compiled the Grammar Hit List after years of correcting the same mistakes on paper after paper.

1. Confusion of "it's" and "its"

"it's" = "it is"

It's raining cats and dogs out.

Tip: don't use the apostrophe unless you can substitute "it is" in the sentence.

“Its”= possessive pronoun.

The dog lost its collar.

“Its” goes with such other possessive pronouns as “hers,” “his,” “ours.” Possessiveness is built into the word. There’s no need to use an apostrophe.

Hint: when a noun is possessive, another noun almost always follows it. (The first noun has actually become an adjective modifying the second.)

My aunt’s new car already needs repair.

(“Aunt” is ordinarily a noun, but here it has become one of the adjectives modifying car.)

2. Confusion of “there,” “their,” and “they’re.”

“there” = indicates place or existence

There were strong winds all night.

(Note: when “there” precedes the verb, as in this sentence, the subject comes after the verb, and the verb must agree with it, not with “there.”)

“their” = possessive

Their car rolled backwards down the hill and into the ravine.
(This is where most people make mistakes—they use “there” instead of “their.”)

“they’re” = contraction of “they are”

They’re coming late for breakfast.

3. confusion of “to,” “too,” and “two”

“to” = preposition

We had our backs to the wall.

“too” = “also,” or an intensifier

Ex. Are you in this class, too? (“also”)

Ex. A person can’t have too much English. (intensifier)

“two” = the number 2

Two kids at a time can be hard to handle; three are chaos.

4. Confusion of “accept” and “except”

“except” is either a verb or a preposition: as a verb, it means “exclude” or “make an exception”

He shouldn’t be excepted from your consideration. (verb)

You invited everyone to the party except me. (preposition)

“accept” is only a verb.

They don’t accept the judge’s decision.

5. Confusion of “then” and “than”

“then” = sequence in time, or conclusion.

sequence: Then we found out the class was closed.

conclusion: You see, then, that there are only two possible answers.

“than” = comparison

She got here sooner than her brother.

6. Confusion of “affect” and “effect”

“Effect” is almost always a noun.

The earthquake had a devastating effect on the neighborhood.

“Affect” is almost always a verb.

How do you think the volatility of the stock market will affect your investments?

Here’s the difficulty, though. Sometimes “effect” is a verb meaning “to cause” or “to bring about.”

She effected a change in their attitudes toward whether women should have executive positions in the corporation.

Similarly, occasionally you will see “affect” used as a noun. This is generally limited to specialized contexts in psychology and human behavior.

He had a peculiar affect, and we could not pinpoint its cause.

Here “affect” means “mannerism” or “behavioral quirk.”

7. Confusion of “your” and “you’re.”

“your” = possessive.

The UPS delivered your package today.

“you’re” = contraction for “you are.”

If you’re not there, you’re square.

8. Confusion of “lie” and “lay.” (These words are confused by so many otherwise good speakers that we’re clearly in a transitional period; at some point in the future, we will probably not make a distinction, but for now, here is what is correct.)

“Lie” means either to say something untrue (no one makes a mistake about this meaning) or to assume a prone position.

It’s time to lie down for my nap.

“Lay” means to put something down. It takes a direct object.

He lays the cards down one by one and doesn’t let anyone see the ace up his sleeve.

(Confusion arises from the past tense of “lie,” which is “lay,” the same form as the present tense “lay,” though it’s a different verb. Just for the record, the past tense of “lay” is “laid.” This all seems strange, but it’s a historical coincidence, like all usage.)

9. Write “supposed to” and “used to,” not “suppose to” and “use to.”

Correct: I used to sleep until noon, but my mother told me I was supposed to get a job.

10. Write “a lot.” The incorrect form, written as a single word with no space, is so incorrect, I can’t even get the computer to write an example of its evil badness.

Correct: A lot of people from my geology class are hiking in the mountains these days.

11. Write “could have,” “should have,” and “would have,” not “could of,” “should of,” or “would of” (even that’s what you hear in almost all conversation).

Correct: I could have (would have/should have) gotten there on time.

12. Never, NEVER put an apostrophe on a verb.

This is *so* wrong: He love’s me, he love’s me not.

13. Never, NEVER use “’s” to make a noun plural.

This is even more wrong: Their neighbor’s take good care of the yard.

14. Write “beliefs,” not “believes,” to indicate the plural of “belief.”

This is not an ear mistake, but a misapplication of the usual rule to

change “f” to “v” and add “es” when a word ends in “f.” In this case the rule is set aside because changing “belief” to “believes” to indicate more than one belief results in the same form as the third person singular verb, which makes a sentence confusing: He **believes** the earth is made of green cheese.

15. “Where” and “were.”

“Where” indicates place. Ex. We know **where** the presents are hidden.

“Were” is the past tense plural (or singular) of the verb “to be.” We **were** going to register for classes tomorrow.

16. “Whether,” “Weather.”

“Weather” is what you look up a forecast about. It’s the sun and rain and clouds and heat and cold.

“Whether” refers to a choice. “We didn’t know **whether** to stop and help or just call the police.”

Whether you come or not, it’s your decision.

17. “Loose” and “lose.”

“Loose” is an adjective. Ex. This swimsuit is too loose.
(The verb form would be “loosen.” Ex. We’ll have to loosen our belts after that huge dinner.)

“Lose” is always a verb. Ex. Don’t lose your books on the way home.

You can’t “loose” your books, and your socks will never be “lose.”