

# WORD USAGE AND GRAMMAR GUIDE

*C. A. Tuggle*

We misuse many words in the English language. What follows is a list of some of the more common problem words and phrases for broadcasters. You should supplement this guide or any other stylebook with a good, recently published dictionary, but it's important to note that dictionaries list all the ways we can use words, even in slang. Writers should stick to the definitions that are most accepted, usually the first two definitions listed. Going to the sixth or seventh definition of a word in the dictionary can cause broadcast writers problems in terms of the viewers or listeners being able to follow what you're saying. We stress again, a television or radio news writer should make sure audience members understand what she or he has written the first time they hear it.

## Some Helpful Hints

In broadcasting, you can probably have a successful career without knowing the difference between a complex and a compound-complex sentence, or the difference between a gerund and a participle. But you do have to be able to recognize what the subject of the sentence is, whether verbs and pronouns agree with it, and so on. Here are three guidelines to help in troubling cases.

### Using "I" or "Me"

You should use these in conjunction with other nouns and pronouns just the same as you use them when they're alone. For example, you wouldn't say "Bob went to the store with I." You also wouldn't say "Bob went to the store with Jill and I." The key is to remove the second person and the word "and" from the sentence, see if you should use *I* or *me*, and then reinsert the second person and the word "and." It would be "Bob went to the store with me," so it should be "Bob went to the store with Jill and me." Also, it would be "I went to the store," so it should be "Jill and I went to the store."

## Identifying the Subject of the Sentence

This is sometimes a problem when the sentence includes a prepositional phrase. For example: “a group of students,” “a herd of elephants” and “a coalition of English teachers” are all singular. The general rule is to remove the prepositional phrase, determine whether the subject is singular or plural, use an appropriate verb, then reinsert the prepositional phrase. So take out the phrases “of students,” “of elephants,” and “of English teachers,” and you’ll see that it would be “a group goes,” so it should be “a group of students *goes*”; it would be “a herd charges,” so it should be a “herd of elephants *charges*”; and it would be “a coalition votes,” so it should be “a coalition of teachers *votes*.”

There is one exception to this. If you’re talking about something or someone who is one of many in a group, then the verb should agree with the group. So in situations when you’re talking about one of many, don’t apply the general rule of removing the prepositional phrase. For example: “She’s one of the best teachers who *have* ever worked at City High.” The reason you treat these differently is that if you removed the prepositional phrase, all you’re left with is “She’s one.” One what?

Here’s another way to think about it. If you lump someone or something into a group, the reference goes back to the group and is plural. However, if you pull that person or thing out of the group and consider the person or thing individually, then it’s singular. For example:

“He’s one of the boys who are coming to the party.”

“One of the boys is coming to the party.”

## Subject/Verb Agreement

First, you have to determine what the subject is and whether it’s singular or plural. How about “Two thousand dollars is/are enough to buy the stereo system”? That’s singular, because you’re talking about a quantity; so it should read “Two thousand dollars is enough. . . .” If you were referring to 2,000 individual bills, that would be plural, such as with “There were two thousand dollars stacked on top of one another.” But with most quantities, the subject is singular. For example: 500 dollars, a million pounds, 2,500 square feet and so on. With most portions and proportions, the subject isn’t the amount, but the noun itself. For example, “a third of our viewers,” “27 percent of the respondents,” and “half the supplies” are all plural.

## Giving Human Characteristics to Nonhuman Things

Rescue boats can’t pluck people out of the water, unless they’re equipped with robotic arms. Plans can’t intend to do anything; only planners can. Small craft can’t exercise caution on the high seas, Mr. Weatherman; only boaters can. Storms don’t *decide* to turn back out into the Atlantic;

they just do it. When you write a sentence, make sure the subject is capable of the action (verb) you've assigned to it. Some things can be done only by living organisms, and the more complicated the task (reasoning, for example) the higher the life-form required to do it.

## Word Usage

**a, the** Some writing texts advise not using “a” when referring to something that can be numbered because “a” sounds too much like “eight.” However, if we write and pronounce words as we do in conversation, this isn't a problem. Pronounce the word “a” as “uh” and the word “the” as “thuh.” That's how we all talk, and it sounds very stiff to say “A (long “a” sound) train derailed and spilled the (as in “thee”) cargo.” Also, this allows us to say “a million dollars” and not “one million dollars.” The latter sounds a bit stiff, and again, that's not how people talk.

Also, don't use “the” in the first reference to something. For example, don't say “police discovered the body” if the viewers don't know which body we're talking about. Say “police discovered a body”; then on subsequent references it's OK to say “the body” because we've already established which body is the subject of the story.

**about** Things happen about a certain time, not around a certain time. See **on**.

**abstinent** See **celibate**.

**abuse, misuse** Both words mean to use wrongly or incorrectly, but abuse often has the added connotation of physical injury or harm.

**accept, except** Accept means to receive with approval; except means to exclude. For example: The club voted to *accept* everyone *except* John.

**across, around** Around means encircling; therefore, it's impossible for things to be happening around a certain area. Instead, things happen across (from one side or end to the other) the state or nation. It would be around the world, because as Columbus proved, the world is round.

**acute, chronic** Acute is something that's sharp, sudden, and of short duration. Chronic is of long duration and might or might not also be acute. So in most cases, acute pain differs from chronic pain.

**administration** See **government**.

**adopt, approve, enact, pass** Amendments, resolutions, and rules are adopted or approved. Bills are passed; laws are enacted.

**adopted, adoptive** Children are adopted, making their new parents adoptive.

**adversary, opponent** An opponent is anyone on the other side. An adversary is openly hostile.

**adverse, averse** Adverse means harmful or unfavorable, such as with adverse weather. Averse means not in favor of or disposed against.

**advice, advise** Advice is a noun, and it's what you give. Some people seem to like to give it whether they're asked for it or not. Advise is a verb and means to give advice, to suggest a course of action.

**affect, effect** These words create much confusion, but that doesn't have to be the case. Both can be used as verbs or nouns, but in the most common usage affect is a verb meaning to produce a change or to influence; effect is a noun meaning the change itself, the result. For example:

How will the vote *affect* the council's stance on the proposal?

The *effect* isn't likely to be seen for some time.

**affluent, effluent** Affluent typically means wealthy; effluent means liquid waste.

**afterward, backward, downward, forward, toward, upward** Not afterwards, backwards, downwards, forwards, towards, or upwards.

**aggravate, irritate** Aggravate means to make something worse, as in "He aggravated an old football injury." Irritate means to annoy. You can't aggravate someone nor can you be aggravated about something.

**agnostic, atheist** An agnostic believes there's not enough evidence to conclude that there's a God. An atheist believes there is no such thing as God.

**allude, elude** To allude is to refer to something indirectly; to elude is to escape from or avoid, often by deceitful means.

**although, while** Use although when you mean "in spite of the fact that" or "on the other hand." While means "at the same time as" or "during the time that." For example:

*Although* Sarah doesn't like sleeping on the floor, she agreed to do so *while* the relatives are visiting.

**alumna, alumni, alumnus** A male graduate is an alumnus, a female graduate is an alumna, and more than one graduate are alumni.

**among, between** Things take place among three or more people or objects, and between two parties or objects. However, even if there are three or more people or objects involved, if they interact two at a time, it's between.

**amoral, immoral** Someone is amoral if that person has no morals, and is immoral if he or she breaks an existing moral code.

**annual** An event isn't considered annual until it has taken place for three consecutive years. In its first year, call it the inaugural or the first. In its second year, call it the second.

**anticipate, expect** Anticipate carries the added connotation of preparing for what's expected.

**anxious, eager** If you're anxious about something, you're nervous, fearful, or apprehensive. If you're eager to do something, you're excitedly anticipating it.

**anybody, anyone, everybody, everyone, nobody, no one, somebody, someone** All take singular verbs. For example:

Everybody *comes* to my house after Friday night football games.

Someone *knocks* on my door every Saturday morning at seven.

No one *jumps* when the tiny cannon is fired.

Anybody *has* the right to voice an opinion.

**apparently, evidently** Both mean appearing to be so. However, *apparently* implies some doubt as to the truth of the statement. For example:

*Apparently*, Jane is sincere this time. (It seems that way, but you're not sure.)

*Evidently*, the burglar left some clues at the scene. (In this sense, you don't doubt this is true, but you don't have firsthand knowledge of it.)

**apprise, appraise** Apprise means to inform; appraise means to place a value on something. For example:

The jeweler *apprised* the couple that he had *appraised* the diamond necklace at two million dollars.

**approve** See **adopt**.

**arbitrate, mediate** After hearing the sides of an argument, an arbitrator comes to a decision that the parties must adhere to. A mediator helps the parties talk through and solve their differences.

**around** See **across**.

**as** See **like**.

**assassin, killer, murderer** An assassin kills by secret assault and frequently for political reasons. Someone who kills with a motive of any kind is a killer. A murderer is someone who has been convicted of murder. However, be careful calling someone a murderer even if that person has been convicted of the crime. It's preferable to say he or she was convicted of murder, because we don't know the person did the crime unless we were there to witness it. However, we know the person has been convicted. That's a matter of record.

**assure, ensure, insure** Assure means to convince or make secure or stable. Ensure means to make certain that something happens. Use insure when referring to insurance. For example:

I want to *assure* you I'll be there.

She *assured* him everything would be OK.

I'll *ensure* the package arrives on time.

Do you want to *insure* the package?

**atheist** See **agnostic**.

**athletics director** Not athletic director. The full title is Director of Athletics.

**author** Use this word as a noun only. If you want to say someone wrote something, then say the person wrote it.

**average** If you write about *the* average, it's singular. *An* average is plural. For example:

The average age of incoming students *has* risen in the past decade.

An average of 250 people *have* seen the play each night.

**averse** See **adverse**.

**backward** See **afterward**.

**bad, badly, good, well** People feel bad or they feel good. If you say someone feels well or feels badly, it means the person's sense of touch either is or isn't well developed. However, in terms of *doing* something, people either do well or do badly. If you say someone did good, the meaning is that he or she did a good deed such as feeding the hungry or working with Habitat for Humanity. The same is true of someone who does bad. So, on a test or project you do well or do badly. Don't be confused by the difference between how you feel and how you perform. However, if asked how you feel, it's appropriate to say "I'm well." The meaning is that you're not sick. But don't say "I *feel* well."

**ban, bar** Ban means to forbid or prohibit; bar means to shut or exclude. People can be banned from doing something, and things can be banned. Only people can be barred from something. For example:

My father *banned* me from seeing Jill again.

Demonstrations are *banned* on the library lawn.

I was *barred* from entering the courthouse.

**bear market, bull market** A bear market means declining stock prices; a bull market indicates rising stock prices.

**because** See **since**.

**because of** See **due to**.

**benefactor, beneficiary** A benefactor does good; a beneficiary is the one who benefits from the doing of good.

**between** See **among**.

**biennial, biannual, semiannual** Something is biennial if it occurs every two years. It is biannual or semiannual if it occurs twice a year.

**blatant, flagrant** Something is blatant if it's very noticeable, noisy, or offensive. It's flagrant if it's overtly outrageous, that is, not just a little harmful. Something can be blatant (there for everybody to see) and not be flagrant.

**both, each** Both means two things collectively; each means two or more things considered individually.

**boy, girl, man, woman, gentleman, lady** Only people in their teens or younger should be called boys or girls. Some suggest only those younger than 16 years of age should be called boys or girls. Man and woman are the preferred terms used to refer to physically mature individuals. Definitely *don't* refer to a group of males as men and a similarly aged group of females as girls. Use gentleman or lady only with titled people or in very specific circumstances when that's definitely what you're trying to say (as in First Lady, Lady Diana, everyone considered him a true gentleman, and so on). Don't use lady or gentleman in a generic sense as synonyms for woman or man, because most of the time you have no way of knowing if someone is a gentleman or is a lady. Also, don't use man as a replacement for human, human being, or person.

**boycott, embargo** A boycott involves a group agreeing not to purchase goods or services from another group or business until certain conditions are met. An embargo is a legal restriction of trade and usually involves not allowing goods into or out of a country. For example:

Southern Baptists said they'll *boycott* Disney theme parks and products until the company quits producing R-rated movies.

The United States will continue its *embargo* of Cuba.

**bring, take** You *bring* something toward the speaker or subject and *take* it away from the speaker or subject. For example:

Grandma wanted Red Riding Hood to *bring* her some cookies.

Red Riding Hood decided to *take* cookies to her grandma.

**brothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, fathers-in-law, mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, sons-in-law** Not brother-in-laws and so forth.

**bug, tap** A bug is a concealed electronic listening device used to pick up sounds in a room. A tap is a device attached to a telephone line and is used to pick up phone conversations. Hence, offices are bugged and phone lines are tapped.

**bull market** See **bear market**.

**bullet** See **shell**.

**burglarize** See **rob**.

**but, however** Both of these words indicate that what follows contrasts with what's been said or written already, but many people use them to continue a thought. For example: "Bethany went to the store but came back with groceries." One would expect that she'd come back with groceries if she went to the store, so there's no contrast. That sentence should read: "Bethany went to the store and came back with some groceries." A sentence in which "but" would be appropriate is "Bethany went to the store, but she came back without anything." There's a contrast because what happened differs from what we'd expect. Likewise, "but" doesn't work in this sentence: "He only



wanted to stop crime in his neighborhood but that might have cost a Miami man his life.” There’s no contrast here; it’s a continuation of a thought. Either replace “but” with “and” or, better yet, make it two sentences. “He only wanted to stop crime in his neighborhood. That might have cost a Miami man his life.”

**can** See **may**.

**celibate, chaste, abstinent** Celibate means unmarried, so priests who take vows of celibacy have agreed to remain unmarried. Chaste means abstaining from carnal love, and chastity often goes along with a vow of celibacy, but they’re not the same thing. Practicing abstinence also means deciding not to do something, at least for a time, and is often used in reference to a decision not to engage in premarital sex.

**cement, concrete** Cement is the powder that’s mixed with water to make concrete. So houses are made of concrete blocks, not cement blocks. (And the Beverly Hillbillies didn’t swim in a *ce-ment* pond.)

**censor, censure** Censor (as a verb) means to delete as unsuitable, to find fault with. A censor (as a noun) is the person who does those things. Censure (as a verb) means to officially criticize or reprove. Censure (noun) is the criticism. Representatives and senators who run afoul of their colleagues are censured.

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** Considered one entity, so use singular verbs.

**character, reputation** Your character is what kind of person you are; your reputation is what others think of you.

**chaste** See **celibate**.

**cheap, inexpensive** Both mean costing little, but cheap has the added connotation of poor quality.

**childish, childlike** People who are childlike display the positive attributes of childhood, such as being innocent, trusting, loving, and the like. Childish is derogatory and means displaying negative and inappropriate traits often associated with children, such as stubbornness, selfishness, and so forth.

**chronic** See **acute**.

**citizen, resident** A citizen is a person who has acquired all the civil rights afforded by a nation through birth or naturalization. So, one can be a citizen of a country, but not of a state or city. Refer to Chicago residents rather than Chicago citizens. Some of the residents of any major city, we’re sure, *aren’t* citizens.

**climatic, climactic** Climatic means having to do with the climate and is rarely used in broadcasting. Climactic pertains to a climax.



So don't write about a *climatic* event unless you're talking about the weather, and be careful with *climactic*. It isn't very conversational, anyway.

**coed** Out of date and considered sexist. Avoid it.

**cohesive, coherent** Both mean sticking together, but cohesive is used in reference to people and objects, coherent in reference to ideas or other abstractions and has the added connotation of logical flow. For example:

The army platoon was a *cohesive* unit.

He made a *coherent* argument in favor of the bill.

**collision, crash** For there to be a collision, both objects must be moving. A car can't collide with a utility pole, but it can crash into it.

**comedian, comic** Use these for both males and females. Comedienne is considered out of date.

**compare, contrast** When you compare you look at similarities and differences; when you contrast you look only at differences.

**comprise, compose** Compose means to be the parts of; comprise means to include or contain. For example:

The 50 states *compose* the United States.

The United States *comprises* 50 states.

*Make up* or *includes* are preferred.

**concrete** See **cement**.

**constant, continuous, continual** Continuous means without ceasing; continual means repeatedly. If it were to rain continuously during an extended period of time, we'd all be looking for an ark in which to stay dry. It could rain continually for weeks without causing any major concern. Constant is a problem because it can mean either ceaseless or regularly recurring. Because constant is used in different ways and the viewers might not be able to figure out which way you're using the word, you're better off writing continuous or continual.

**contagious, infectious** Something that's contagious can be spread only by physical contact. Something that's infectious is communicable by the spread of germs, with or without physical contact.

**contemporary, modern** Something that's modern is recent or is happening now. Something is contemporary if it happens or happened at the same time as something else. So, something can be contemporary and not be modern.

**convince, persuade** You convince someone *of* something; you persuade someone *to do* something.

**could** See **may**.

**couple** This word causes grammatical problems because it can take either singular or plural verbs. It depends on whether you're referring to the couple as a unit or as distinct individuals. For example:

The couple *has* standing dinner reservations at Bob's Steak House.

The couple *were* married at St. Vincent's Cathedral.

A couple of gang members *were* brought in for questioning.

Also, the "of" is needed. It's not a couple apples or a couple years; it's a couple of apples or a couple of years.

**crash** See **collision**.

**criteria, criterion** Criteria is plural; criterion is singular. For example:

The *criteria* for the contest have changed.

The primary *criterion* for membership in the club is a hefty bank account.

**criticism, critique** Criticism carries the connotation of a negative evaluation; critique commonly means pointing out both the good and the bad.

**cupfuls** Not cupsful.

**currently, presently** Currently means now; presently means soon. Don't use presently to mean "at this time."

**cynical, skeptical** Skeptical means inclined to doubt; cynical means contemptuous, quick to find fault. A good dose of skepticism is healthy in journalism. Cynicism can get you in trouble in a lot of ways.

**data** Correctly used, data is a plural noun and takes plural verbs. Often when you use this word, you're doing a story involving scientists, economists, and the like, and they know the difference.

**daughters-in-law** As written.

**Daylight Saving Time** Not daylight *savings* time. When you're referring to a particular time zone, it's Central Daylight Time, for example.

**defective, deficient** Defective means having a defect; deficient means lacking something. For example:

He sent the *defective* part back to the manufacturer.

He was *deficient* in the number of credit hours needed to graduate.

**definite, definitive** Definite means exact or certain; definitive means conclusive or final. For example:

The incorporated area has *definite* boundaries.

The scientist's findings were *definitive*.

**demolish, destroy** Both indicate doing away with something completely, so it's not possible to partially destroy something, and it's redundant to say something was completely demolished.

**diagnosis, prognosis** A diagnosis tells us the state of something; a prognosis predicts the future developments related to that thing. For example:

The doctor's *diagnosis* was cancer and her *prognosis* wasn't good.

**differ from, differ with** To differ from something is to be unlike it; to differ with someone is to disagree.

**dilemma** A dilemma is worse than a problem or a concern. A person facing a dilemma has to choose between two unattractive alternatives.

**disabled, handicapped** Disabled is preferred. However, don't use either if the disability isn't germane to the story.

**disinterested, uninterested** Disinterested means impartial; uninterested means having no interest in something. You can't be disinterested in a movie, unless you're rating it.

**dispute** See **rebut**.

**dissociate** Dissociate means to end a connection or association with. Note that the word contains only one "a." It's not disassociate.

**dived, dove** Dived is the past tense of dive. Dove is often used in this way (as in the boys dove into the water), but dived is more precise. Dove presents the additional problem that it might be pronounced as dove (a bird).

**Down syndrome** Not Down's syndrome.

**downward** See **afterward**.

**due to, thanks to, because of** Because of is better. You certainly don't want to write a sentence like this, which we heard during one of the worst winter storms on record: "Power lines are down all across the area *thanks to* a severe ice storm." Why would anyone be thankful to be without electricity in subzero weather? The power lines were down *because of* the ice storm.

**each, either, neither** Use either when referring to one or the other of two objects or people; use each when referring to both or all of two or more things or persons. However, *each* word takes singular verbs, unless either or neither is followed by both a singular and a plural noun or pronoun. Then the verb takes the form of the noun or pronoun closest to it. For example:

Each of us *needs* to make an effort to succeed.

Either of the two options *is* acceptable.

Either he or they *have* to show up.

Neither *is* suitable for the position.

Neither they nor he *wants* to leave the company.

Neither he nor they *want* to leave the company.

Also see **both**.

**each other, one another** Two people look at *each other*, but more than two people look at *one another*.

**eager** See **anxious**.

**effect** See **affect**.

**effective, efficient** Something that's effective gets the job done. Getting it done with a minimum of time and effort means you're efficient. So, something can be effective without being very efficient. You can skateboard from Chicago to St. Louis and you'd get there eventually, but you'd expend a lot of energy and use a lot of time doing so. It's an effective way to travel between the two cities, but it certainly isn't very efficient.

**effluent** See **affluent**.

**either** See **each**.

**elicit** See **illicit**.

**elude** See **allude**.

**embargo** See **boycott**.

**empathy, sympathy** Both words mean to share the feelings of another, but empathy goes a bit further than sympathy and means being able to imagine yourself in someone else's situation.

**enact** See **adopt**.

**enormity, enormousness** Enormity refers to something outrageously heinous or offensive; enormousness refers to massive size. For example:

The *enormity* of his crime was beyond belief.

The *enormousness* of the mountain was truly impressive.

**ensure** See **assure**.

**epigram, epigraph, epitaph, epithet** An epigram is a witty saying. Epigraphs and epitaphs are inscriptions on monuments or tombstones. An epithet is a word or phrase used to characterize a person or thing and often carries a negative connotation.

**eternity, infinity** Eternity refers to endless time; infinity refers to anything that's infinite or endless.

**everybody, everyone** See **anybody**.

**evidently** See **apparently**.

**except** See **accept**.

**excite, incite** Excite means to arouse the emotions of (normally taken to mean arousing positive emotions); incite means to influence someone to act.

**expect** See **anticipate**.

**explicit, implicit** Explicit means clearly stated; implicit means implied or suggested. Therefore, something that's implicit is open to interpretation. In broadcast writing, we should always clearly state what we mean.

**famous, infamous** Famous means widely known and popular; infamous also means widely known, but carries a negative connotation. For example, at times in his career Mohammed Ali has been famous. At one point, however, he was infamous.

**farther, further** Use farther to refer to physical distance and further for all other uses. For example:

Los Angeles is *farther* from New York than from Denver.

The board members voted to study the proposal *further*.

We have much *further* to go to come to an agreement.

**fathers-in-law** As written.

**fewer** See **less**.

**figurative, literal** Figurative means symbolic, not literal. Literal means exact.

**firm** A firm is a partnership, such as a law firm. The term shouldn't be used to refer to companies or corporations, both of which are incorporated business entities. Firms aren't incorporated.

**flagrant** See **blatant**.

**flail** The word means to whip or beat. Some dictionaries include "a wild waving of the arms" among the definitions.

**flammable** See **inflammable**.

**flaunt, flout** Flout means to show disdain for; flaunt means to make a showy display of something to draw attention.

**flounder, founder** As verbs, flounder means to struggle helplessly and founder most commonly refers to ships and means to sink or run aground. Ships don't flounder because inanimate objects can't struggle.

**forward** See **afterward**.

**further** See **farther**.

**gender, sex** Use gender when you're referring to the way a group of people is viewed by society; use sex when you're talking about the biological differences between men and women.

**gentleman** See **boy**.

**gibe, jibe, jive** Gibe means to taunt or sneer, jibe means to agree (or, in sailing, to shift direction) and jive means either swing music or talk meant to deceive or confuse. For example:

They *gibed* him about his lack of athletic ability.

The two suspects told stories that didn't *jibe*.

The senator's speech was nothing but *jive*.

**girl** See **boy**.

**good** See **bad**.

**got** This is one of the most overused words in the English language. Got is the past tense of get. For example:

I got an “A” on the test. Got shouldn’t be used to add emphasis to the words “has” or “have.” For example, it’s unnecessary to say: “You have got to see Joe’s new car” or “The city council has got to make a decision soon.” “You’ve got” means the same thing as “you have got” and shouldn’t be used, nor should she’s got, he’s got, we’ve got, and so forth. A television station in central Florida uses the slogan: “We’ve got you covered.” Perhaps the promotions people think that’s catchy, but the news people should never put up with that in the station’s P.R. campaign. The line “I’ve got you babe” might be acceptable in a song by Sonny and Cher (we just admitted to having been around for a long time), but it’s not acceptable when you’re trying to write with precision.

**government, junta, regime, administration** Governments and juntas are ruling groups. The only difference is that juntas are in power after a coup (an overthrow of the existing government). A regime is a political system, and an administration is the people who make up the executive branch of a government.

**handicapped** See **disabled**.

**hanged, hung** People are hanged (though not often anymore), and objects are hung. For example:

They *hanged* the horse thief at noon.

The stockings were *hung* by the chimney with care.

**he, him, I, me, she, her** There’s often a lot of confusion about which one of these pronouns to use when they’re used in conjunction with a noun or another pronoun. The key is to remove the noun or the second pronoun and the word “and.” In other words, consider the pronoun by itself. For example, look at this sentence: “Barbara went to the store with Veronica and I.” It should be “with Veronica and me.” Take the words “Veronica” and “and” out of the sentence. You wouldn’t say Barbara went to the store with I; you’d say she went to the store with me. So, decide on the pronoun and then add the other words back into the sentence. Some other examples:

I watched the movie with Bob and *her*.

*He* and I are on the football team. (Here you have to use the singular verb with the singular pronoun “I” when you take “he and” out of the sentence. Considering the pronoun by itself the sentence would read: “I am on the football team.” Don’t be confused by the need to change from plural to singular verbs at times. The concept is the same.)

Lou's not as smart as *she*. (This type can be a little tricky. There are a couple of implied words at the end of this sentence. What we're really saying is "Lou's not as smart as she is smart." Turn the sentence around, and you'll see why it should be "she." If Lou isn't as smart as she, that means that she is smarter than Lou. You wouldn't say "Her is smarter than Lou.")

**he, she** There's no gender-neutral singular pronoun in English. In the past, writers have used "he" when the sex of the subject was unknown, but this is now considered sexist. To say "he or she" sounds stiff, so in broadcast it's best to restate the sentence and use the plural pronoun "they." For example:

A student should do the best *he* can. (sexist—not all students are male)  
 A student should do the best *he or she* can. (grammatically correct, but sounds a bit awkward and nonconversational)  
 Students should do the best *they* can. (best choice)

**historic, historical** Something is historic if it makes history or is significant in history. Anything that's part of history is historical. However, this distinction has virtually disappeared.

**hopeful, hopefully** Use hopeful and hopefully to describe someone's feelings, not as a substitute for "I hope." For example:

I hope the professor will change my grade. (If you said "Hopefully, she will change my grade," you're saying she will change it and will be hopeful about something while she's doing it.)

*Hopefully*, I made my request for a grade change. (In other words, I was hopeful that my request would be honored.)

"Most Americans *hope* the tensions in the Middle East will end soon." (Rather than "Hopefully, the tensions will end soon." Tensions can't be hopeful.)

**hung** See **hanged**.

**I** See **he**.

**illicit, elicit** Illicit means unlawful; elicit means to bring to mind. For example:

She was convicted of *illicit* use of campaign funds.

Seeing him at the reunion *elicited* memories of high school.

Note: These words are used frequently by reporters and writers trying to sound knowledgeable. Both sound somewhat nonconversational, don't they? In the first sentence "illegal" would work better, as would "brought back" in the second sentence.

**injured/wounded** Both mean that a living being is hurt. But *wounded* has the added connotation of intent and, most often, through use of a weapon. So it's better to say that earthquake victims are *injured* and shooting victims are *wounded*.



**immoral** See **amoral**.

**impeach** Impeach means to accuse a public official of wrongdoing. It doesn't mean "to remove from office." Bill Clinton was impeached but not removed from office.

**implicit** See **explicit**.

**imply, infer** Imply means to suggest or indicate something without saying it directly; infer means to draw a conclusion from. For example:

The speaker *implied* that a new university president would be appointed.

I *inferred* that there had been problems with the current university administration.

**impromptu** Impromptu means without planning. Anything that involves an invitation or notice to attend can't be impromptu.

**incite** See **excite**.

**incredible, incredulous** Incredible means unbelievable; incredulous means skeptical. For example:

When he described the ride as *incredible*, she was *incredulous*.

**indict** Indict means to bring legal charges against. Don't write that someone was indicted for murder because that sounds as though you think the person did it. Say the person was indicted on a charge of murder (or bribery, arson, and so on).

**inexpensive** See **cheap**.

**infamous** See **famous**.

**infectious** See **contagious**.

**infer** See **imply**.

**infinity** See **eternity**.

**inflammable, flammable** Both mean capable of burning, but inflammable sounds as though it means exactly the opposite. Use flammable if you mean capable of burning, and describe something that won't burn as nonflammable. (Hyphenate words like this to make them easier to read.)

**insure** See **assure**.

**inter, intra** The prefix inter means between two or more items in the same category; intra means within or between two parts of the same thing. For example:

*interstate*—goes from one state to others

*intercollegiate athletics*—contests between teams from different colleges or universities

*intramural sports*—students on teams within the same school play against each other

**invaluable, valuable, valueless** Invaluable means of immeasurably great value, and often carries the added connotation of irreplaceable. Valuable means of great value or price, but isn't as strong as invaluable. Valueless means without value.

**irritate** See **aggravate**.

**issue** An issue is a point in question or dispute. Therefore, all issues involve controversy; so there's no need to refer to a controversial issue, and there's no such thing as a noncontroversial issue.

**itch, scratch** Itch is a noun and scratch is a verb. To relieve the discomfort caused by an itch, you scratch. You can't itch something.

**jail** See **prison**.

**jerry-built, jury-rigged** Jerry-built means put together hastily and with flimsy materials. Jury-rigged means assembled quickly with materials on hand. So, something might have been jury-rigged without being jerry-built. Broadcast engineers have been known to jury-rig entire remote systems that are very sturdy and work beautifully.

**jibe, jive** See **gibe**.

**junta** See **government**.

**jurist, juror** A jurist is an expert at law; a juror is a member of a jury. A jurist might or might not be a judge.

**ketchup** Other spellings aren't correct and could lead to pronunciation problems (such as catsup or catchup).

**killer** See **assassin**.

**kudos** The word means credit or praise for an achievement and takes singular verbs. For example:

Kudos *is* in order for your graduation with honors.

**lady** See **boy**.

**last, latest, past** When one says last night, there's not much room for confusion about what's meant. Everyone knows the speaker is talking about the most recent period of darkness. The same is true of last week. But when you write "*the* last week," there *is* room for confusion, as in: "John wrecked his car twice in the last week." The question that arises is, In the last week of what? John's life on earth? Don't use "the last" unless there will be no more of whatever we're talking about. Therefore, the sentence we wrote earlier should read: "John wrecked his car twice in the *past* week." So, don't write that something happened in the last month, or in last year, or in the last decade, or in the last millennium unless the world is about to end. Also, if you write something about John's last trip to the store, the implication is that John will never again go to the store. Write "John's latest" or "most recent trip."

**lay** See **lie**.

**leave alone, let alone** Leave alone means to depart from or cause to be in solitude. Let alone means to allow to be undisturbed. If you ask someone to leave you alone, that means you want to be by yourself. If you want the person not to harass you, you would ask to be let alone.

**lend, loan** Lend is a verb; loan is a noun. You lend something, such as your car or money. What you lend is a loan.

**less, fewer** Use less when something can't be numbered and fewer when numbering is possible. For example:

There are *fewer* oranges on the trees this season.

There is *less* fruit on the trees this season.

You can number *pieces* of fruit or specific types of fruit, but you can't number fruit. Likewise, you can number hours or minutes, but you can't number time.

Note: Although it would be very time-consuming to count grains of sand, it is possible. However, although it's possible to number grains of sand, it's not possible to number sand itself. Think about it this way, using sand as an example: Can I say, "There's one grain of sand, and there's another"? Can I say, "There's one sand and there's another"? If the answer is yes, then use fewer (as in grains of sand, pieces of fruit, lumps of coal); if the answer is no, then use less (as in sand, fruit, or coal).

**less than** See **over**.

**libel, slander** Libel is defamation in writing or printing; slander is defamation by the spoken word. In the vast majority of modern legal cases, courts haven't distinguished between whether material was broadcast or printed, and most suits brought against media outlets are libel suits. Because of the reach and permanence of broadcast, material that defames is considered to have been "published."

**lie, lay** Lie means to tell an untruth or to recline. Lay means to place something on something else. You *lie* down, but you *lay* something down. The problem comes with lie (recline) in the past tense, which is lay. For example:

He felt so bad he wanted to *lie* down and die.

He *lay* down and died.

Here's how to conjugate the verbs: *Lie (tell an untruth): lie, lied, lied*

I cannot tell a *lie*.

I *lied* to my mother.

I've *lied* in similar situations.

*Lie (recline): lie, lay, lain*

I will *lie* on the bed.

Yesterday, I *lay* on the couch until noon.

I've *lain* in bed all day when I've been sick.

*Lay (place something) lay, laid, laid*

I will *lay* my books on the table.  
 I *laid* my books on the table when I got home.  
 I've *laid* my books there before.

You can see that the two ways to use “lay” can create some problems. But you wouldn’t want to say he lied down, because that leads to confusion. Initially, it sounds as though you’re saying he told an untruth.

**like, such as** Like means similar to. Use “like” when you’re comparing two things and “such as” when mentioning something as an example of a broader category. For instance:

Joe is *like* Pete in many ways. (The two are similar.)

Mothers *such as* Betty Jones are in favor of the new grant for child-care facilities.

Betty Jones is among those mothers who favor the grant. If you write mothers *like* Betty Jones are in favor, what you’re saying is that mothers similar to her are, but perhaps she herself isn’t. Also, don’t substitute like for “as” or “as if.”

He studies, *as* he should. (He should study and he does.)

If you write he studies *like* he should, you’re making a judgment about his particular study habits. Perhaps he studies with the CD player at full volume. Are you saying he should study in that way?

**lion’s share** This phrase means more than “the majority of.” It means all or nearly all.

**literal** See **figurative**.

**loan** See **lend**.

**majority, plurality** The majority is more than half the total, often referred to as 50 percent plus one. When there are more than two candidates for office, the candidate receiving more votes than any other, but less than 50 percent has received the plurality of votes. This often means there must be a runoff between the top two vote-getters.

**man, mankind** Other words are preferable, such as humans, people, or humanity for mankind, and a person or an individual for man. Also see **boy**.

**masochism, sadism** Masochism means enjoyment of inflicting pain on yourself; sadism means enjoyment of inflicting pain on others. The pain doesn’t necessarily have to be physical. People who fall into these categories are masochists or sadists.

**Mass** Priests don’t say Mass; Catholics celebrate Mass.

**may, might, can, could** These are often used interchangeably. They shouldn’t be. The key question, as with all words used in broadcast, is, “Might the viewers take what you’ve written in a way that’s different from how you intended it?” For example, the following sentence could be interpreted two different ways.

Jane *may* go to the park.

Do you mean Jane might decide to go to the park, or that Jane has permission to go to the park? In instances when you mean something might happen, use “might” and there will be less room for confusion. The same is true for “can.” Use “can” when you mean “is able.” For example:

*Can* Jane go to the park?

We don’t know if you’re asking if she has permission to (if you are, use *may*) or if she’s physically able to. In that case, use “can.” The word “could” should be used when there’s a condition attached.

Jane *could* have ridden to the park if her bike weren’t broken.

**me** See **he**.

**media** The word “media” is plural and takes plural verbs. It means all forms of mass communication considered together. A single form of mass communication, such as television, is a medium. Mediums are palm readers.

**mediate** See **arbitrate**.

**medium** See **media**.

**might** See **may**.

**misuse** See **abuse**.

**modern** See **contemporary**.

**moral, morale** Moral deals with right and wrong; morale refers to one’s confidence, self-esteem, and the like.

**more than** See **over**.

**mothers-in-law** As written.

**Mr., Mrs., Miss, Ms.** All are courtesy titles. See Chapter 1.

**murderer** See **assassin**.

**neither** See **each**.

**next of kin** This is brutally nonconversational. When have you ever used that phrase in a chat with a friend? Use family or relatives, either of which would be used in a conversation rather than next of kin, which wouldn’t.

**nobody, no one** See **anybody**.

**none** None means not one in most uses and takes singular verbs. There are times when saying not one of something doesn’t make sense, such as “not one clothes” or if you’re referring to no amount of something. Read the sentence and substitute not one for none and see if it makes sense. If it does, use a singular verb. If it doesn’t make sense, use a plural verb. For example:

None of the children *was* injured in the fire.

None of his clothes *are* worth much.

However, even if you know something is grammatically correct, it might sound wrong to you, and if it sounds wrong to you, it will probably sound wrong to some of the viewers or listeners. So in the first example, you wouldn't change the sentence to make it grammatically incorrect and you might not want to write it the way it's written because the word "none" is used incorrectly so often it sounds wrong when you use it the right way. So rewrite the sentence: "All of the children escaped injury in the fire."

**notorious, notable** Notorious means widely but unfavorably known. Notable is a synonym for prominent or noteworthy. When one gains notoriety, he or she is *unfavorably* thought of.

**number, total** "The number" or "the total" takes singular verbs; "a number" or "a total" takes plural verbs. See **average**.

**obscene, pornographic** Anything that's highly offensive is obscene. Pornographic material is designed to stimulate sexual thoughts. Obscene material might or might not be pornographic.

**observance, observation** An observance is the act of complying with a law or custom or of taking part in a ceremony. Observation is the act of noticing. So, to say that the couple celebrated the *observation* of their 50th anniversary would be incorrect.

**occur, take place** Things that occur happen with no planning. Things that take place are planned.

**Olympics** This is a plural noun: "The Summer Olympics *are* held every four years." They are considered a collection of different sports events, not a single entity.

**on, about** You give a speech on a stage, about a certain topic. You get and give information about things, not on them. Use on to mean "positioned upon."

**one** The question of which possessive pronoun to use with "one" or "a person" creates some problems. To say, "one's home is one's castle" sounds very stiff, but so does "one's home is his or her castle." Also, you wouldn't want to use "is his castle" or "is her castle," nor would you say "is their castle," because you're talking about a single individual and "their" is plural. Try: "People's homes are their castles." The great majority of the time, when you use the word "one," you're referring to one at a time, and that's singular.

**one another** See **each other**.

**opponent** See **adversary**.

**oral, verbal** Oral means of the mouth; verbal means using words, which can be written or spoken. You could say "she verbalized her feelings" or "they made verbal arguments" if you mean that someone

spoke; but there's some room for confusion unless you explain that you specifically mean words were uttered. Of course, you wouldn't say "she oralized her feelings." Write: "She spoke about her feelings."

**over, more than, under, less than** Over and under are frequently misused. Use under and over when something is physically under or over something else. However, when you mean a greater or lesser amount or number of something, use more than or less than. For example:

The plane flew *over* the field.

The car cost *more than* 30 thousand dollars.

The car was *under* water.

The house sold for *less than* 100 thousand dollars.

Also, people don't argue *over* something; they argue *about* it. And "through the years" is preferable to "over the years."

**overlook, oversee** Overlook means to ignore or to fail to see. It also means to have a view of. Oversee means to supervise. For example:

I *overlooked* the small print in this contract.

I've decided to *overlook* your latest temper tantrum.

The house *overlooks* the canyon.

I'll *oversee* the construction project.

**pardon, parole, probation** A pardon results in the forgiveness of the charges against a person; he or she faces no further punishment. A pardon is granted by a chief of state. Parole means the person was let out of prison before the end of the sentence. It's granted by a parole board. A person on probation is convicted but doesn't actually serve time, if the person doesn't mess up again. A suspended sentence is the same as probation.

**pass** See **adopt**.

**past** See **last**.

**persecute, prosecute** Persecute means to harass; prosecute means to bring legal proceedings against. Members of the legal profession aren't supposed to persecute people, but some are supposed to prosecute those accused of wrongdoing.

**person, people** Use person when speaking about an individual and people when the reference is to more than one person. Avoid persons.

**personal, personnel** Personal means private or pertaining to an individual. Personnel means workforce or employees. There's a big difference between a manager making personal decisions and making personnel decisions.

**persuade** See **convince**.

**phenomenon, phenomena** Phenomenon is singular; phenomena is plural. You wouldn't write about *a* phenomena.



**plurality** See **majority**.

**pornographic** See **obscene**.

**possible, probable** Something that's possible might happen; if it's probable, it's *likely* to happen.

**precede, proceed** Precede means to come before; proceed means to move forward. For example:

Ninth grade *precedes* tenth grade.

Let's *proceed* to the next item on the agenda.

**prescribe, proscribe** To prescribe is to suggest the use of something. To proscribe is to forbid or prohibit something. For example:

The doctor *prescribed* a powerful pain killer.

The judge *proscribed* him from having further contact with his ex-wife.

**presently** See **currently**.

**prison, jail** Generally, people serve time in prison for committing felonies. Jails are for minor offenders or those awaiting trial or sentencing on any charge. Penitentiaries and correctional facilities are prisons.

**probable** See **possible**.

**probation** See **pardon**.

**proceed** See **precede**.

**prognosis** See **diagnosis**.

**proscribe** See **prescribe**.

**prosecute** See **persecute**.

**prostate, prostrate** The prostate is a gland; prostrate means lying down, in a prone position. Hence, no one suffers from *prostrate* cancer.

**proved, proven** Proved is the past tense of prove; proven is an adjective describing something tested and shown to be effective. For example:

The lawyer had *proved* her case.

The program is a *proven* ratings winner.

**ravage, ravish** Ravage means to inflict great damage or destroy; ravish means to rape or abduct and carry away. For example:

The storm *ravaged* the town.

The attacker *ravished* the sisters.

**rebut, refute, dispute** To rebut or dispute is to argue to the contrary, to debate or quarrel; to refute is to prove something wrong or false. A television station in south Florida once ran a promotional spot that said its anchor was correct about something although other media in the area *refuted* him. If he was proved wrong, how could he have been right?

**recur** Not reoccur.

**regime** See **government**.

**reluctant, reticent** Reluctant means unwilling to act; reticent means unwilling to speak.

**reputation** See **character**.

**resident** See **citizen**.

**revert** Revert means to go back to a former place, position, or state of being. Revert back is redundant.

**rob, burglarize, steal** Rob means to strip or deprive someone of something *by force*. Burglary is a crime of stealth usually involving breaking and entering. Therefore, people are robbed and places are burglarized. Anyone who takes something dishonestly has stolen.

**runners-up** Not runner-ups.

**sadism** See **masochism**.

**sanction** This word has two different meanings. It can mean to approve or to punish. If you use this word, be sure your meaning is clear.

**schizophrenia, split personality** These aren't the same. Schizophrenics can't distinguish fantasy from reality. Someone with a split personality has two or more distinct personalities, each with its own character traits.

**scratch** See **itch**.

**semiannual** See **biennial**. Semiannual is the correct spelling, but you might want to spell it semi-annual to make it easier to read.

**sensual, sensuous** Both mean affecting the senses and are often used with a sexual connotation. People are sensual and things are sensuous.

**sex** See **gender**.

**she** See **he**.

**shell, bullet** Shotguns and some military weapons fire shells. Handguns and rifles fire bullets. The pellets from a shotgun shell are called shot.

**since, because** In some instances, "since" can be used to indicate a causal relationship, but that's not the primary use of the word. It should be used to mean "from then until now." Sometimes since can mean "because," but because always means because. Why take a chance of using since incorrectly? Use because. For example:

*Since* she came to live here, she's been disagreeable.

Do you mean she's been disagreeable because she came to live here, or that she's been disagreeable from the time she came to live here until now? "Since" leaves room for confusion as to your meaning. "Because" does away with the confusion.

**sisters-in-law** As written.

**skeptical** See **cynical**.

**slander** See **libel**.

**somebody, someone** See **anybody**.

**sons-in-law** As written.

**split personality** See **schizophrenia**.

**steal** See **rob**.

**such as** See **like**.

**sympathy** See **empathy**.

**take** See **bring**.

**take place** See **occur**.

**tamper, tinker** Tamper means to meddle harmfully; tinker means to fuss clumsily or to idly examine.

**tap** See **bug**.

**than, then** Than is used to introduce the second item of a comparison. Then means at that time or next in order. For example:

John is taller *than* Bill.

*Then* the board voted to give the mayor a raise.

**thanks to** See **due to**.

**that, who, which** Use “that” when you’re referring to anything other than people or animals with names. In those cases, use “who.” “Which” should be used only to introduce a nonessential clause or when “that” has already been used in the sentence. For example:

How to use “that” is the rule *that* is broken most often.

John is the student *who* breaks the rule most often.

Spike is the dog *who* accompanies John everywhere.

The rule, *which* is broken often, is the subject of much debate.

The professor said *that* it’s the rule *which* is broken most often.

**the** See **a**.

**tinker** See **tamper**.

**total** See **number**.

**toward** See **afterward**.

**under** See **over**.

**uninterested** See **disinterested**.

**unique** If something is unique, it’s one of a kind. Things or people can’t be quite unique or very unique or one of the most unique. They’re either unique or they’re not.

**unknown, unnamed** Everyone has a name. Assailants, robbers, and the like are unknown, not unnamed. If the police know who the bad guy is but aren't saying, he still has a name. He's just unidentified.

**upward** See **afterward**.

**valuable, valueless** See **invaluable**.

**verbal** See **oral**.

**wait on, wait for** People in the service industry (servers in restaurants, for example) are the only people who wait on others. In all other contexts, use wait for.

**watch, warning** In weather, a watch means a hurricane might pose a threat to a specific area. A warning means the hurricane is expected to hit a certain area within 24 hours. With tornadoes, a watch means a tornado is possible; a warning means a tornado exists or is suspected to have formed.

**well** See **bad**.

**well-known, widely known** People who are famous are widely known. (Note there is no hyphen in widely known.) A fact that is known by many people is well-known. For example:

Sylvester Stallone is *widely known*.  
It's *well-known* that the sky is blue.

**what, which** "What" should be used when the category is unknown, but "which" should be used when referring to a specific item in a category. For example: *What* do you want to do this weekend? I want to go to a movie. *Which* movie do you want to see? It would be incorrect to say, *What* movie do you want to see?

**whereabouts** Takes singular verbs. For example: The whereabouts of the robber *is* unknown. However, whereabouts isn't very conversational. Use location or something similar.

**while** See **although**.

**who, which** See **that**.

**woman** See **boy**.

**wounded** See **injured**.

**wreck, wreak** Wreck means to destroy; wreak means to inflict.