

## Tips on Avoiding Common Writing Errors

Here is a list of several errors commonly made in writing. Learn the correct way of writing these words and phrases so that your writing will be not only correct but also effective and powerful.

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**affect/effect** – affect = verb; to cause a change in something  
Example: Allergies AFFECT many people.

effect = noun; a change or a result in something; an outcome or a consequence

Example: The main EFFECT of the storm was that many trees were blown down.

**all of a sudden** = The phrase is “all of A sudden” (not “all of the sudden”)  
Example: Everyone was having a good time at the party when all of A sudden the lights went out.

**a lot** = This phrase is TWO separate words.  
Example: We heard A LOT of rumors about Fred’s past.

**By .....** Wrong: By studying hard will help a student make good grades.  
Correct: By studying hard, A STUDENT will make good grades.

or

Studying hard will help a student make good grades.

### Could have, should have, would have.

Always follow *could*, *would*, *might*, and *should* with **HAVE**, not *of*.

Wrong: I should of studied harder for that test.

Correct: I should HAVE studied harder for that test.

**idea/ideal** These two words mean different things. Don’t confuse them.

idea = a mental thought or perception

Example: Mary liked Tom’s idea of taking a vacation in the winter.

ideal = A perfect situation without any problems or drawbacks.

Example: It would be ideal if the United States had 100% employment.

**in which** These two words do not always go together. Use them only when you mean a sense of something being INSIDE something else.

Example: The lawyer carefully removed the box IN WHICH my mother’s will was kept.

**Note:** Do not repeat the word *in* at the end of a sentence using the phrase in which.

Wrong: Illinois is the state in which I was born in.

Correct: Illinois is the state in which I was born.

Other examples of correct uses of *which*.

- I really enjoyed the most recent job FOR WHICH I got paid.  
(People are paid FOR a job.)
- “Old Faithful” is the nickname BY WHICH this geyser is known.  
(Things are known BY a nickname.)
- This is the hammer WITH WHICH my brother built that cabinet.  
(People build things WITH a hammer.)

**it’s/its**

It’s = A short-cut way of writing IT IS or IT HAS:  
 Jeff said that IT’S always hard to find a parking space near campus.  
 (it is always...)  
 IT’S been a long time since I had a physical check-up.  
 (It has been a long time...)

Its = Whatever “it” is OWNS something.  
 The committee gave ITS report on Tuesday.  
 Wal-Mart is having ITS big sale next month.

**lie/lay =**

lie = To tell a falsehood; Sometimes I lie about my age.

Forms: I lied (past tense)  
 I was lying  
 I had lied

lay = To put something down on a surface. I always lay my books over there.

Forms: I laid my books down. (past)  
 I was laying my books down.  
 I had laid my books down.

lie = To put one’s body in a horizontal position for sleeping or resting.  
 I lie down every day for about twenty minutes.

Forms: Yesterday I lay down for an hour. (past)  
 I was lying down when you called.  
 I had lain down for a few minutes when the bell rang.

**loneliness =** Spell it correctly. I-o-n-E-l-i-n-e-s-s

**loose/lose =** Don't confuse these words.

loose = Not tight; not closed completely (rhymes with *goose*)

The top of this jar is rattling because it is LOOSE.

lose = Not winning a contest or an athletic event (rhymes with *blues*)

We did not want to LOSE our big homecoming game.

lose = To fail to keep something or to hold on to it.

It was a shame that he had to lose such a good parking space.

**receive -** Spell it correctly. r-e-c-E-i-v-e

**their/there/ -** Take time to use these words correctly.  
**they're**

there = In that place. I like Chicago because I was born THERE.

There = A "dummy subject." THERE are a few things you should remember about this job.

they're = A contraction for THEY ARE.

I like bananas when THEY'RE ripe.  
(they are)

their = Of or belonging to something plural.

The students received THEIR grades early this year.

The two children visited THEIR father last week.

**two/to/too -** Don't confuse these words.

TWO = The number 2. My boss lives only TWO blocks from me.

TO = A preposition in front of a noun.

to the school            to the grocery store

to the church            to the job

Used in front of a present-tense verb

I like **to eat**  
**to fish**

It began **to snow**  
**to rain**

I want **to go**  
**to play**

TOO = 1. Another word for ALSO

I go to John A. Logan College, and my cousin goes there TOO.

2. Meaning "very" or "extremely" or "going beyond acceptable limits"

He was TOO old to bungee jump.

The necklace was TOO expensive.

The policeman said I had been driving TOO fast.

**quiet/quite/quit** - quiet = Silent; without much noise (rhymes with *buy it*)  
The room became QUIET when the mayor entered.

quite = Very (rhymes with *white*)  
It became QUITE hot in the afternoon.

quit = To stop working or to leave a job permanently  
(rhymes with *bit*)  
The factory workers QUIT promptly at 5 p.m.

**than/then** - Don't confuse these two words.

than = (rhymes with *can* and *man*) A word used when comparing  
two people, places, or things.  
Chicago is much larger THAN Carbondale.

then = (rhymes with *ten*)  
1. At that time. We ate a nice dinner, and THEN we went  
for a short walk.  
2. Used with *If* to mean "as a result of something"  
If it rains, THEN we can't have a picnic.

**were/where** – Don't confuse these words.

were = (rhymes with *fur*) Plural, past-tense form of verb "to be"  
Tom and Joe WERE in class yesterday.

where = (rhymes with *dare*) Referring to a physical place.  
I know WHERE you live and WHERE you go to school.

**who's/whose** – who's = A contraction of WHO IS or WHO HAS.  
A teacher knows WHO'S late and WHO'S been on time.  
(who is) (who has)

whose – Belonging to WHO; ownership.  
The scholarship goes to the student WHOSE grade point  
average is the highest.

**woman/women** – WOMAN = one female adult human being (rhymes with "go-mun")  
I know a WOMAN who has traveled around the world.

WOMEN = (rhymes with *lemon*)  
two or more adult female human beings  
Many WOMEN have successful careers and a home life.

**your/you're** - YOUR = Belonging to you (rhymes with *door* and *more*)  
I'll be visiting YOUR home next week.

YOU'RE = A contraction of YOU and ARE (rhymes with *pure*)  
YOU'RE one of the most interesting people I know.

**nowadays**

This word is frequently misspelled.

It means “at the present time in history” or “at the current time in which we are now living” as opposed to some earlier unspecified times in the past. It is made up of three small words all jammed together to make one big word:

now + a + days = nowadays

The professor explained that nowadays the phrase “a hard day at work” refers to stressful mental tension rather than hard physical labor on the job.

**feel,  
fell,  
fill**

Do not confuse these three similar-sounding words.

feel – (rhymes with *peel* and *steel*)

1. To touch with the fingers or the hand to get a sensation.  
Susan likes to feel the smoothness of silk.

2. To make an estimate of one’s general state of health.  
The doctor asked his patient, “How do you feel today?”

fell – (rhymes with *sell* and *bell*)

--The past tense of the verb *fall*.

Last year snow fell in Los Angeles, and many people fell down while trying to walk on it.

fill – (rhymes with *pill* and *Bill*)

1. To leave no remaining room, as in a container.  
Jack wanted to fill his coffee cup to the brim.

2. To make complete and whole, as in a written form.  
We were asked to fill out the entire application in ink.

**Go, went, have gone**

These are the three main forms of the verb *go*.

**go** – Present tense.

I go to Logan, and my cousin goes there also.

**went** – Past tense of *go*

Last semester I went to SIU but didn’t really care for it.

**gone** – the form of *go* used only after the words *have* or *had*.

If I had gone to a much larger school farther away, perhaps I would have liked it better.

**Note:** Never ever say or write “have went” or “had went.”

It is very incorrect.

**kid (kids)**

This is a very casual word for “young children.” As such, it is acceptable only in very casual conversations with a close friend. However, in written essays for a college class, it is too informal to be used in that way. Use a different, more formal word for “young children.”

Technically, a *kid* is actually a baby goat or a baby lamb.

kid = A baby goat

young children = youngsters, teenagers, young people,  
teeny-boppers, adolescents, youth

**you**

This is another word that is very informal and can be misused. Technically, the words *you* and *your* refer only to the person (or persons) being directly addressed by someone else. Avoid trying to make it refer to everyone in general.

Incorrect: When you are attending college, you should take your required classes early.

(The above sentence would be correct only if it is being addressed directly to one or more students.)

More accurate and general:

When students are attending college, they should take their required classes early.

Here is a list of several alternative words and phrases that are more correct than using *you*:

1. One = One should always take care of one's health.
2. A person = A person should always take care of his health.
3. An individual = An individual should always take care of his health.
4. People = People should always take care of their health.
5. Any specific noun that fits the context  
A patient should always take care of his health.

**hardly**

A negative adverb meaning “in a difficult way” or “with great difficulty.”

The assembly hall was so noisy that I could hardly hear the speaker.

**Note:** Never use any form of the word *not* with *hardly*.

Wrong: The fog was so thick that I could not hardly see.

Correct: The fog was so thick that I could hardly see.

**only** This word should always be placed as close as possible to what it actually modifies in the sentence.

Not: I only had ten minutes to fill out the lengthy questionnaire.

Rather: I had only ten minutes to fill out the lengthy questionnaire.

**wake up  
turn off/on** Phrases using a preposition as their second word should usually be written together and never separated.

Awkward: My first action every morning was to turn the radio on and listen to it while I brushed my teeth.

Better: My first action every morning was to turn on the radio and listen to it while I brushed my teeth.

**Numbers as  
digits or as  
words?** Which is correct?

My great grandfather is one hundred and two years old.

or

My great grandfather is 102 years old.

I have lived in this area for 5 years.

or

I have lived in this area for five years.

Here's the general rule:

1. If the number can be expressed in one word, then use that one word.  
three children, eight years ago, at age sixteen, fifty students
2. If it takes a hyphenated word to express the number, then use that hyphenated word. (This is usually an expression of age).  
twenty-one years of age
3. If it takes three or more words to express a number, then use digits:  
America is more than 230 years old.  
The Washington Monument is almost exactly 555 feet tall.

The following are always written as digits (numbers), never as words:

1. Years: 1492 1776 1860 to 1865 1912 1963 2001
2. Exact dates: America declared its independence from England on July 4, 1776.
3. Exact expressions of time: The meeting began precisely at 1:16 p.m.
4. Large amounts of money: The huge yacht cost over \$43,000.
5. Street addresses, telephone numbers, social security numbers, etc.