

Common mistakes

Do you make
these common
mistakes?



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10 Common English Language Mistakes (Plus one you may think is an error, but isn't).

One of the wonderful features of the English language is its flexibility. We have a staggering range of words to choose from, whatever we are trying to say. And the ease with which we adopt new words and spread these around the world is a true example of globalisation. But writing in the English language is fraught with opportunities for error and confusion. Avoiding mistakes is not just a pastime for pedants. Writing clear, succinct English helps us to be better understood by anyone who reads our words, even our emails.

1. Affect vs. Effect

Affect is a verb that means 'cause a change in' or 'influence'. *Effect* is mostly used as a noun, although when we write in a formal style we occasionally use it as a verb meaning 'to carry out' or 'cause to happen':

She was greatly affected by the latest news. Smoking will affect your health.

Take care of your personal effects. The sound effects are amazing. The lawyer effected a great result.

2. Me, Myself, I

While many of us learnt at school that '*John and me want to go*' is incorrect, we never learnt the correct usage of the word *me*.

People often use either *I* or the reflexive pronoun *myself* instead of *me*. How often do you hear or read something like this:

Would you please call John or I before you leave?

Would you please call John or myself before you leave?

If you take John out of the sentence, you're either asking the person to '*call I before you leave*' or '*call myself before you leave*.' And of course neither sounds nor looks right.

Compose your sentence as if you were the only subject. It is fine to say: *Would you please call John or me before you leave? [Would you please call me before you leave?]*

Or: *John and I have decided to go next week. [I have decided to go next week.]*

So, don't be afraid to use the word *me* in sentences.

Use *myself* when you want to emphasise that you, alone, will be handling something:

I myself will sort this out.

And when you are the subject of a reflexive verb (sorry to be so technical):

I have told myself this many times.

3. Compliment vs. Complement

Compliment, as a noun, means 'an expression of praise or admiration' and as a verb 'to pay a compliment to'.

As a noun a *complement* is 'something that completes or makes perfect' and as a verb means 'to complete':

When you compliment mum's new dress, mention how well the blue pattern complements her eyes.

4. Principal vs. Principle

People dedicate their lives and careers to upholding *principles* of truth and justice:

Principals are people who head schools.

A school principal should always stick to her principles.

5. Only – careful where you put it

The position of *only* in a sentence can completely change its meaning. As a guide, keep *only* close to the word it belongs to:

Only my son eats carrots for breakfast (as distinct from anyone else in my family).

My son eats *only* carrots for breakfast (carrots are all he eats for breakfast).

My son eats carrots *only* for breakfast (he won't eat them at any other meal).



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6. Everyone vs. Every one

Everyone means *every* person. It is singular, as is *everybody*, *anybody*, *anyone*, *no-one*, *somebody* and *someone*:

Mistake: *Everyone* danced their socks off.

Instead: *Everyone* danced his socks off.

Every one is also singular and we use it to describe objects:

Not: *Every one* of the cars were new.

Instead: *Every one* of the cars was new.

7. Numbers

When we use the word *number*, do we follow it with a singular or a plural verb? It depends whether *number* is preceded by *the* or *a* (*the* is the definite article, and *a* is the indefinite article):

The *number* was... always singular.

A *number* were... always plural.

This also applies to the word *total*.

8. Advice and advise, practice and practise

Advice is a noun, and *advise* is a verb, just as *practice* is a noun and *practise* is a verb:

Noun: Take her *advice*.

Noun: She runs a large legal *practice*.

Verb: I *advise* you to keep quiet.

Verb: I will *practise* every day.

9. Disinterested vs. Uninterested

Uninterested is the opposite of interested. *Disinterested* means impartial or unbiased (but not a lack of interest):

A referee should be disinterested in the game, but interested in the match.

10. Lose some weight

We often use too many words, when less make perfect sense. Here are a few ways you can cut the weight from your sentences:

Whether or not: If you are using *whether* as in *if*, then you can drop the *or not*:

We will soon find out whether [or not] Jane Smith will make a good Prime Minister.

Use *or not* if you are stressing it as an alternative. For example: I'm coming to the party *whether* you like it *or not*.

All of: We sometimes include *of* after *all* when it is not necessary:

Not: *All of* the readers are now happy.

Instead: *All* the readers are now happy.

However, you must use *all of* if it is followed by a pronoun:

I love *all of* them.

Annual/a year: Use one or the other, but not both:

Not: Our *annual* turnover is anticipated to grow by 15% a year.

Instead: Our *annual* turnover is anticipated to grow by 15%.

Or: Our turnover is anticipated to grow by 15% *a year*.

True facts: a fact is always true, so you don't need to use both words.

First conceived/ initially conceived/ originally conceived:

You can only conceive something once.

Possible....may: We sometimes say or write that something is both *possible* and *may* happen:

Not: It is *possible* it *may* rain this weekend.

Instead: It is *possible* it will rain this weekend. Or: It *may* rain this weekend.

Different: This is a word that is often not needed:

Not: There are 124 *different* airline routes across Australia.

Instead: There are 124 airline routes across Australia.

11. And the one rule you were probably taught never to break. But you can. Yes, it's Split Infinitives

In case you're not sure, an infinitive is a verb alone, with nothing to support it (no subject) except the preposition *to*. For example: to be, to go, to run, to snore. For example: *To run slowly wastes time*. Here the verb, *to run*, has no subject.

Many of us were taught that we should never split the *to* from the verb. My understanding is that this belief came from the Romance Languages, whose origins lie in Latin and where the infinitive is one word. Remember when you studied French, or Spanish or Italian? Or even Latin?

However, English could never be called a Romance Language. Whilst many grammarians feel more comfortable keeping the infinitive together, there is no law to say that it cannot be split, and often it has to be for smoother reading and writing:

Not: It is unlikely to *increase significantly* the share price.

Instead: It is unlikely to *significantly increase* the share price.

Or: It is unlikely to *increase* the share price *significantly*.

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