

Frequently Asked Grammar Questions

A lot or Alot?

A lot should be written as two words. Although **a lot** is used informally to mean "a large number" or "many," avoid using **a lot** in formal writing. Example: The crook had many [not **a lot** of] chances to rob the stranger.

A or An?

"Use **a** before a consonant sound; use **an** before a vowel sound. Before a letter or an acronym or before numerals, choose **a** or **an** according to the way the letter or numeral is pronounced: **an** FDA directive, **a** U.N. resolution, **a** \$5.00 bill" (*Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*). Please note: This is the basic rule. For a more thorough presentation of the complexities of using **a** or **an**, see the source cited here.

Accept or Except?

Accept is a verb meaning "to receive" or "to approve."

Example: "I **accept** your offer of the book."

Except is a preposition meaning "excluding" or "leaving out."

Example: "He liked everything on the plate **except** the liver."

Except can also be a verb meaning "to leave out" or "to exclude."

Example: "He **excepted** all Corvettes from his list of favorite cars."

Acronyms and Initialisms?

"**Acronyms** are formed by combining the first letter or letters of several words; they are pronounced as words and written without periods" (Alred, Brusaw, and Oliu, *The Business Writer's Handbook*).

Examples: radar (radio detecting and ranging), COBOL (Common Business-Oriented Language), scuba (self-contained underwater breathing apparatus). "**Initialisms** are formed by combining the initial letter of each word in a multiword term; they are pronounced as separate letters" (*Alred, Brusaw, and Oliu*).

Examples: e.o.m. (end of month), c.o.d. (cash on delivery), p.m. (post meridian). Usage guidelines:

- "Except for commonly used abbreviations (U.S., a.m.), spell out a term to be abbreviated the first time it is used, followed by the abbreviation in parentheses. Thereafter, the abbreviation may be used alone.
- In long documents, repeat the full term in parentheses after the abbreviation at regular intervals to remind readers of the abbreviation's meaning, as in "Remember to submit the CAR (Capital Appropriations Request) by. . . ."
- Do not add an additional period at the end of a sentence that ends with an abbreviation (example: The official name of the company is DataBase, Inc.).
- Write acronyms in capital letters without periods. The only exceptions are acronyms that have become accepted as common nouns, which are written in lowercase letters, such as *scuba* (self-contained underwater breathing apparatus).
- Generally, use periods for lowercase initialisms (a.k.a., e.d.p., p.m.) but not for uppercase ones (GDP, IRA, UFO). Exceptions include geographic names (U.S., U.K., E.U.) and formal expressions of academic degrees (B.A., M.B.A., Ph.D.).
- Form the plural of an acronym or initialism by adding a lowercase s. Do not use an apostrophe (CARs, DVDs).

Do not follow an abbreviation with a word that repeats the final term in the abbreviation (ATM location *not* ATM machine location)" (*Alfred, Brusaw, and Oliu*).

Active or Passive Verbs?

"The voice of a verb indicates the strength of the subject in a sentence. It tells us whether that subject takes action or receives action. There are two possible voices: **active** and **passive**. In the active voice, the stronger form, the subject of the sentence takes the action of the verb.

Our army **won** the battle.

The subject **army** is strong since it takes action. This sentence uses the active voice. In the passive voice, the weaker form, the subject is acted upon.

The battle **was won** by our army.

In this sentence, the subject **battle** is weak because it receives the action of the army. It takes no action of its own —a battle cannot win itself — and so the sentence uses the passive voice" (Strumpf and Douglas, *The Grammar Bible* 38).

Affect or Effect?

"**Affect** is a verb meaning 'to influence.' **Effect** is a noun meaning a result.' More rarely, **effect** is a verb meaning 'to cause something to happen.'

[Examples:] CFCs may **affect** the deterioration of the ozone layer. The **effect** of that deterioration on global warming is uncertain.

Lawmakers need to **effect** changes in public attitudes toward our environment" (Anson, Schwegler, and Muth, *The Longman Writer's Companion* 475).

All Ready or Already?

All ready means "fully prepared."

Example: "The scouts were **all ready** for the test."

Already means "previously."

Example: "The children were **already** in the pool when the guests arrived."

Allusion or Illusion?

"An **allusion** is an indirect reference.

[Example:] Did you catch my **allusion** to Shakespeare?

An **illusion** is a misconception or false impression.

[Example:] Mirrors give the room an **illusion** of depth" (Hacker, *A Writer's Reference* 124).

Among or Amongst?

Both are correct and mean the same, but *among* is more common.

Among or Between?

"When only two are involved, the answer is easy: **between**.

[Example:] Miss Bennet sensed a barrier **between** her and Mr. Darcy.

With three or more, you have a choice. Use **between** if you're thinking of the individuals and their relations with one another.

[Example:] There were several embarrassing exchanges **between** Lydia, Kitty, and Jane.

Use **among** if you're thinking of the group.

[Example:] Darcy's arrival created a stir **among** the guests" (O'Connor, *Woe Is I*).

Amount or Number?

Amount should be used to refer to quantities that cannot be counted or cannot be expressed in terms of a single number.

Example: "Repairing the Edsel took a great **amount** of work."

Number is used for quantities that can be counted.

Example: "A large **number** of deer ate the corn."

And or But to begin a sentence?

"Everybody agrees that it's all right to begin a sentence with **and**, and nearly everybody admits to having been taught at some past time that the practice was wrong" (*Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*). In addition, "many of us were taught that no sentence should begin with '**but**.' If that's what you learned, unlearn it — there is no stronger word at the start. It announces total contrast with what has gone before, and the reader is primed for the change" (William Zinsser qtd. in *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*). Using **and** or **but** at the beginning of a sentence makes the tone of the writing more informal — like a conversation. Care needs to be taken to ensure a sentence beginning with **and** or **but** doesn't become a sentence fragment (Fogarty, *Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing* 80).

Annotated Bibliography?

"An **annotated bibliography** is just like a regular bibliography [. . .] except that each entry adds a description or summary of the work's aim, purpose, or contents. Annotations are usually a paragraph or two [. . .] **Annotated bibliographies** are commonly assigned to help students survey and report on a body of scholarship or prepare for a longer research paper. Elements of an **annotated bibliography**

- It briefly introduces the topic of the bibliography and perhaps the kinds of works it covers.
- It refers accurately to the literature cited and follows the expected documentation style [. . .]
- It follows each reference with a clear description or summary, briefly but accurately representing the work.
- It arranges entries alphabetically, sometimes grouped in sections by date or by general topic or focus" (Anson, Schwegler, and Muth, *The Longman Writer's Companion* 97).

Apostrophes?

"The **apostrophe** has four main uses:

1. To show the omission of numbers in such expressions as *Christmas '98* or letters in expressions that imitate certain patterns of speech — *finger lickin' good*.
2. To form contractions (*I'm, we've, can't, they'll*).
3. To form plurals of single numbers and letters: 'Mary brought home a report card with two A's and two B's.' (The **apostrophe** is not needed when letters or numbers appear in groups of two or more: *the 1920s, the ABCs, the rule of 78s, two Ph.D.s*)
4. To form possessives" (Lederer and Dowis, *Sleeping Dogs Don't Lay* 156).

Item 3 above can also be stated this way: "Get this straight once and for all: when the "s" is added to a word simply to make it a plural, no apostrophe is used (except in expressions where letters or numerals are treated like words, like 'mind your P's and Q's and 'learn your ABC's!)" (Brians, *Common Errors in English Usage* 15). As you can tell from the explanation on how to form the plural of *ABC* in number 3 above and in this paragraph, not all experts agree. What should you do? Select a style and be consistent in using it. Forming possessives is the most complicated use of the **apostrophe**. Again, not all experts agree. You know what to do: Select a style and be consistent in using it. Richard Lederer and Richard Dowis give the following information on forming possessives:

- "To form the possessive of a singular noun, add an apostrophe and an s even if the noun ends in s."

Example: "He married the boss's daughter."

- "To form the possessive of a plural noun, add an apostrophe only, except for nouns such as men and people that have irregular plurals and are treated as if they were singular when the possessives are formed."

Example: "Boston Market advertises 'New! Kid's Meal. Starting at \$1.99.' [. . .] When more than one child is involved, the possessive is not *kid's*. It's *kids'*."

- "Do not use an apostrophe to form the possessive of personal pronouns, except for the pronoun one."

Example: "It is really pleasant to take one's time when playing golf." "This house is ours."

- "When two or more words, taken as a unit, show joint possession, use the possessive form with the last only."

Example: "Let's all ride in John and Pedro's car." (*Sleeping Dogs Don't Lay* 156-159)

As per...?

"We find **as per** used in two ways. It is still in use in business correspondence and in straightforward but somewhat stiff prose [. . .] Your decision to use **as per** or not would seem to be a matter of personal choice and taste; the tonal needs of a particular passage may make it useful at times even if you avoid it ordinarily" (*Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*).

Assume or Presume?

"They're not identical. **Assume** is closer to support, or 'take for granted'; the much stronger **presume** is closer to believe, dare, or 'take too much for granted.'

[Example:] I can only **assume** you are joking when you **presume** to call yourself a plumber!" (O'Connor, *Woe Is I* 91).

Bad or Badly?

We use **bad** (an adjective) with linking verbs such as *is*, *seems*, *feels*, *looks*, or *appears*.

Example: "I feel **bad** that I missed the concern."

We use the adverb **badly** with action verbs.

Example: "He smells **badly**." This sentence means he can't detect the smell of his girlfriend's perfume, but "He smells **bad**" means he needs to shower and use deodorant.

Between you and I or Between you and me?

"Because the pronouns following **between** are objects of the preposition, the correct phrase is **between you and me**. Yet the phrasing **between you and I** is appallingly common" (Garner, *The Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style*).

Bring and Take?

"Use **bring** when an object is being transported toward you, **take** when it is being moved away. [Examples:] 'Please **bring** me a glass of water. Please **take** these flowers to Mr. Scott'" (Hacker, *A Writer's Reference* 126).

Can I or May I?

"**Can** implies ability; **may** implies permission or uncertainty.

[Example:] "Bart **can** drive now, but his parents **may** not lend him their new car" (Anson, Schwegler, Muth, *The Longman Writer's Companion* 477).

Cannot or Can Not?

"Both spellings are acceptable, but **cannot** is more frequent in current use" (*Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*).

Capitalization?

For a list of all the rules about **capitalization**, follow these instructions:

1. Go to the top of this page and use the "click here" feature to learn more.
2. Scroll down and click on "capitalization and spelling."
3. Click on "capitals," and you'll come to the rules of capitalization.

The two rules for capitalization listed below are asked most often.

Capitalization in Titles?

"In titles, capitalize the first word, the last word, and all words in between **except** articles (*a, an, the*), prepositions under five letters (*in, of, to*), and coordinating conjunctions (*and, but*). These rules apply to titles of long, short, and partial works as well as your own papers" (Anson, Schwegler, and Muth. *The Longman Writer's Companion* 240).

Capitalization of Titles of Persons?

"Capitalize titles of persons when used as part of a proper name but usually not when used alone.

[Examples:] District Attorney Marshall was reprimanded for badgering the witness. The district attorney was elected for a two-year term.

Usage varies when the title of an important public figure is used alone.

[Example:] The *president* [or *President*] vetoed the bill" (Hacker, *A Writer's Reference* 305).

Cite or Site?

Cite is a verb meaning "to quote for purposes of example, authority, or proof."

Example: "He **cites** many experts in his article."

Site is usually used as a noun meaning "place or scene."

Example: "Check the AARP **website**," and "We erected the wall on the **site** of our future home."

Colon Use?

"A **colon** tells the reader that what follows is closely related to the preceding clause. The **colon** has more effect than the comma, less power to separate than the semicolon, and more formality than the dash. It usually follows an independent clause and should not separate a verb from its complement or a preposition from its object. . . .

[Example:] Your dedicated whittler requires three props: a knife, a piece of wood, and a back porch.

Join two independent clauses with a **colon** if the second interprets or amplifies the first.

[Example:] But even so, there was a directness and dispatch about animal burial: there was no stopover in the undertaker's foul parlor, no wreath or spray.

A **colon** may introduce a quotation that supports or contributes to the preceding clause.

[Example:] The squalor of the streets reminded her of a line from Oscar Wilde: 'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.'

The **colon** also has certain functions of form: to follow the salutation of a formal letter, to separate hour from minute in a notation of time, and to separate the title of a work from its subtitle or a Bible chapter from a verse.

[Examples:] Dear Mr. Montague:

departs at 10:48 P.M.

Practical Calligraphy: An Introduction to Italic Script

Nehemiah 11:7" (Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*, 7-8).

Commas and Periods Inside Quotation Marks?

"Place periods and commas inside quotation marks. [Example:] "This is a stick-up," said the well-dressed young couple. "We want all your money." This rule applies to single quotation marks as well as double quotation marks. It also applies to all uses of quotation marks: for quoted material, for titles of works, and for words used as words. Exception: In the Modern Language Association's style of parenthetical in-text citations . . . , the period follows the citation in parentheses. [Example:] James M. McPherson comments, approvingly, that the Whigs were not averse to extending the blessings of American liberty, even to Mexicans and Indians" (48). (Hacker, *A Writer's Reference* 285)

Commas?

These are the basic **comma** rules. If you learn them or keep a copy of them with you whenever you write, you will solve 98% of your **comma** problems.

1. Put a **comma** before *and*, *but*, *for*, *or*, *nor*, *so*, and *yet* when they connect two independent clauses (sentences that can stand alone).
Example: "She hit the shot, and he cheered for her."
2. Separate three or more items in a series with a **comma**.
Example: "We want to protect cats, dogs, and horses."
3. Put a **comma** after an introductory word group.
Example: "Because I was hungry, I bought a hamburger."
4. Set off interrupters with pairs of **commas**, pairs of parentheses, or pairs of dashes.
Examples: "The hamburger, hot and juicy, tasted great."
"The hamburger — which was hot and juicy — tasted great."
"The hamburger (made from ground beef and tofu) tasted great."
5. Put **commas** around the name of a person or group spoken to.
Example: "I hope, Carlene, that you're going with me."
6. Put **commas** around an expression that interrupts the flow of the sentence.
Example: "We took our fishing rods, therefore, and got into the boat."

Complements?

"Linking verbs link the subject to a **subject complement**, a word or word group that completes the meaning of the subject by renaming or describing it. If the **subject complement** renames the subject, it is a noun or noun equivalent (sometimes call a predicate noun).

[Example:] The handwriting on the wall [s] may be [v] a forgery [sc].

If the **subject complement** describes the subject, it is an adjective or adjective equivalent (sometimes called a *predicate adjective*).

[Example:] Love [s] is [v] blind [sc]." (Hacker, *A Writer's Reference* 814).

"When a pronoun is used as a **subject complement** (a word following a linking verb), your ear may mislead you, since the incorrect form is frequently heard in casual speech. . . .

[Example:] During the Lindbergh trial, Bruno Hauptmann repeatedly denied that the kidnapper was he [not him].

If *kidnapper was he* seems too stilted, rewrite the sentence: *During the Lindbergh trial, Bruno Hauptmann repeatedly denied that he was the kidnapper.*" (Hacker, *The Bedford Handbook* 287).

Comprise?

"Nothing is ever 'comprised of' something. *To comprise* means 'to contain or to embrace':

The jury comprises seven women and five men.

All of the following mean the same thing:

The jury is composed of seven women and five men.

The jury is made up of seven women and five men.

Seven women and five men constitute the jury.

Seven women and five men make up the jury.

Even when used correctly, in my humble opinion, *comprise* and *constitute* tend to sound stilted. Some form of *is made up of* sounds better in most cases." (Walsh, *Lapsing into a Comma* 122-123).

Continually or Continuously?

"Yes, there is a slight difference, although most people (and even many dictionaries) treat them the same. **Continually** means repeatedly, with breaks in between. **Continuously** means without interruption, in an unbroken stream. *Heidi has to wind the cuckoo clock **continually** to keep it running **continuously**.* (If it's important to emphasize the distinction, it's probably better to use *periodically* or *intermittently* instead of *continually* to describe something that starts and stops.) The same distinction, by the way, applies to *continual* and *continuous*, the adjective forms" (O'Connor, *Woe Is I* 95-96).

Coordinate or Cumulative Adjectives?

"When two or more adjectives each modify a noun separately, they are **coordinate**.

[Example:] Roberto is a *warm, gentle, affectionate* father.

Adjectives are **coordinate** if they can be joined with *and* (*warm and gentle and affectionate*).

Two or more adjectives that do not modify the noun separately are **cumulative**.

[Example:] *Three large gray* shapes moved slowly toward us." Hacker, *A Writer's Reference* 262).

Data or Datum?

"In much informal writing, **data** is considered a collective singular noun. In formal scientific and scholarly writing, however, **data** is generally used as a plural, with **datum** as the singular form. Base your decision on whether your readers should consider the **data** as a single collection or as a group of individual facts. Whatever you decide, be sure that your pronouns and verbs agree in number with the selected usage" (Alred, Brusaw, and Oliu, *The Technical Writer's Companion* 290-291).

Different From or Different Than?

"**Different from** is preferred to **different than**. I remember this by remembering that *different* has two *f*'s and only one *t*, so the best choice between *than* and *from* is the one that starts with an *f*" (Fogarty, *Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips* 22).

Disinterested or Uninterested?

"They're not the same. **Disinterested** means impartial or neutral; **uninterested** means bored or lacking interest. *A good umpire should be **disinterested**, said Casey, but certainly not **uninterested***" (O'Conner, *Woe Is 198*).

Documenting Online Sources?

What documentation style are you required to use? Once this is determined, click on **Dr. Grammar's Documentation Resources**, and go to the appropriate website for your documentation style.

Internet sources come in two forms: articles that have been previously published in the print media (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *Chicago Tribune*; scholarly journals; books; etc.) and articles or websites that have life only on the World Wide Web (WWW).

Since the WWW is itself a work in progress, it is constantly changing as are the systems which attempt to document material found there. Perhaps the easiest source of information concerning each system of documentation is a book entitled *Online! A Reference Guide to Using Internet Sources* by Andrew Harnack and Eugene Kleppinger (can be found on **Dr. Grammar's Documentation Resources**).

Done or Finished?

"Today both **done** and **finished** are Standard, and you may use whichever one meets the style requirements of your speech or writing" (Wilson, *The Columbia Guide to Standard American English*).

Drank or Drunk?

"When in doubt about the standard English forms of irregular verbs, [. . .] look up the base form of the verb in the dictionary, which also lists any irregular forms. (If no additional forms are listed in the dictionary, the verb is regular, not irregular. [. . .])

Base Form: drink

Past Tense: drank

Past Participle: drunk" (Hacker, *The Bedford Handbook* 312-313).

Due to or Owing to?

"**Due to** is as impeccable grammatically as **owing to**, which is frequently recommended as a substitute for it. There has never been a grammatical ground for objection [. . .] There is no solid reason to avoid using **due to**" (*Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*).

Each is or Each are?

"When **each** is used as a subject, it takes a singular verb or pronoun.

[Example:] **Each** of the reports *is* to be submitted ten weeks after *it* is assigned.

When **each** occurs after a plural subject with which it is in apposition, it takes a plural verb or pronoun.

[Example:] The reports **each** *have* white embossed titles on *their* covers." (Alred, Brusaw, and Oliu, *The Technical Writer's Companion* 291).

earth or Earth?

When you mean dirt, it's **earth**. When you mean the third planet from the sun, it's **Earth**.

Etymology (Word Origin)?

"The origin and history of word or words, or the study of word origins" (*Cambridge Dictionary of American English*). [Dr. Grammar's Word Origins page](#) has a list of online sites and a list of books about etymologies (word origins).

Everybody and Everyone?

Everybody and everyone are interchangeable.

Anyone and anybody are also interchangeable.

Everyone/Everybody is/are happy?

"What's wrong with saying, *Are everybody happy?* After all, when you use the word *everybody*, you're thinking of a crowd, right? Then why do we say, *Is everybody happy?* In other words, just how many people do we mean when we say *everybody* or *everyone*?

The answer is one. Odd as it may seem, these pronouns are singular. We often use them when talking about whole gangs of people, but we treat them grammatically as individual gang members. The result is that each takes a singular verb: *Everybody loves a lover, but not everybody is one*" (O'Conner, *Who Is / 15*).

Farther or Further?

Use **farther** to refer to physical distances.

Example: Indiana is **farther** than I thought.

Further refers to quantity, time, or degree.

Example: They progressed **further** on their research.

Fewer or Less?

Fewer is an adjective used to refer to people or items that can be counted.

Example: Because **fewer** cars showed up for the show, we required **fewer** categories.

Less is used to refer to amounts that cannot be counted.

Example: The small dogs required **less** space and **less** food than the large dogs.

Good or Well?

"**Good** is the adjective; **well** is the adverb. You do something **well**, but you give someone something **good**. The exception is verbs of sensation in phrases such as "the pie smells **good**" or "I feel **good**." Despite the arguments of nigglers, this is standard usage. Saying "the pie smells well" would imply that the pastry in question had a nose. Similarly, "I feel well" is also acceptable, especially when discussing health; but it is not the only correct usage" (Brians, *Common Errors in English Usage*).

Have got or Have gotten?

"When we say, *Fabio **has got** three Armani suits*, we mean he has them. When we say, *Fabio **has gotten** three Armani suits*, we mean he's acquired or obtained them. It's a useful distinction" (O'Conner, *Who Is / 191*).

Hopefully?

"**Hopefully** is a sentence adverb that has raised the hackles of some conservatives, but probably its overuse has made most of the trouble; it had been a perfectly good sentence adverb for generations before the recent objections were heard. Those who don't like it usually urge that *I hope that* or *It is hoped that* be used instead, but **hopefully** is in fact Standard" (Wilson, *The Columbia Guide to Standard American English*).

Hyphenation?

"Consult the dictionary to determine how to treat a compound word. The dictionary will tell you whether to treat a compound word as a hyphenated compound (*water-repellent*), one word (*waterproof*), or two words (*water table*). If the compound word is not in the dictionary, treat it as two words" (Hacker, *A Writer's Reference* 300).

The following rules are not all inclusive, but they are the most common uses of hyphenation. Consult a writing manual for a more extensive explanation.

"Use a hyphen to connect two or more words functioning together as an adjective before a noun. [Examples:] Mrs. Douglas gave Toshiko a seashell and some newspaper-wrapped fish to take home to her mother. Richa Gupta is not yet a well-known candidate.

Generally, do not use a hyphen when such compounds follow the noun. [Example:] After our television campaign, Richa Gupta will be well known.

Do not use a hyphen to connect *-ly* adverbs to the words they modify. [Example:] A slowly moving truck tied up traffic.

Note: In a series, hyphens are suspended. [Example:] Do you prefer first-, second-, or third-class tickets?

Hyphenate the written form of fractions and of compound numbers from twenty-one to ninety-nine. [Example:] One-fourth of my salary goes to pay my child care expenses.

Use a hyphen with the prefixes *all-*, *ex-*, and *self-* and with the suffix *-elect*. [Examples:] The charity is funneling more money into self-help projects. Anne King is our club's president-elect. A hyphen is used in some words to avoid ambiguity or to separate awkward double or triple letters. Without the hyphen, there would be no way to distinguish between words such as *re-creation* and *recreation*. [Examples:] Bicycling in the city is my favorite form of recreation. The film was praised for its astonishing re-creation of nineteenth-century London. [. . .]

If a word must be divided at the end of a line, divide it correctly " (Hacker, *A Writer's Reference* 300-302). Consult a dictionary if you are unsure as to where a word should be divided.

"I" before "E" except after "C"?

We have all been taught the rule, but Richard Lederer has compiled a list of 144 exceptions in his book *Adventures of a Verbifore*. When in doubt about the spelling of a word, go to a dictionary.

(I.e.) or (E.g.)?

"Properly used, each of these is Standard. I.e. abbreviates Latin *id est*, 'that is'; use it when you wish to repeat in different words what you've just finished saying: I'm strongly opposed; i.e., I'm determined not to cooperate. E.g. abbreviates the Latin tag *exempli gratia*, 'for the sake of example, for example.' [Eat foods containing a lot of fiber, e.g., fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.] People sometimes say the names of the letters i and e or e and g instead of saying the English that is or for example, but the abbreviations aren't much shorter, and most of us would prefer the English words in speech, no matter how familiar the Latin abbreviations are in writing....Most editors put them in italics; all require a comma after the second period (The Columbia Guide to Standard American English 165).

Idiom?

"Idioms are phrases that don't mean what they literally say, but have meaning to native speakers. For example, the phrase *under the weather* is known by most native English speakers to mean that someone

isn't feeling well, but if you weren't a native English speaker, you would probably have no idea what *under the weather* means by just looking at the words" (Fogarty, *Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips* 55).

If or Whether?

"It's good practice to distinguish between these words. Use **if** for a conditional idea, **whether** for an alternative or possibility. Thus, *Let me know if you'll be coming* means that I want to hear from you only if you're coming. But *Let me know whether you'll be coming* means that I want to hear from you about your plans one way or the other" (Garner, *The Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style*).

Imply or Infer?

"If you **imply** something, you hint or suggest it.

[Example:] Her email *implied* that the project would be delayed.

If you **infer** something, you reach a conclusion on the basis of evidence.

[Example:] The manager **inferred** from the email that the project would be delayed" (Alred, Brusaw, and Oliu, *The Technical Writer's Companion* 294).

In regard(s) to?

"The use of the plural **regards** in the phrases **in regards to** and **with regards to** is incorrect. Since each phrase shows its speaker regarding just one issue, the **regard** is singular: **in regard to** and **with regard to**.

[Examples:] I am calling **in regard to** your memo.

With regard to our meeting, I cannot attend." (Strumpf and Douglas, *The Grammar Bible* 220).

Independent vs Dependent Clauses?

"An **independent clause** is a complete sentence; it can stand alone.

[Example:] Tattooing was not known in the Western world.

A **dependent** (subordinate) **clause** is part of a sentence; it cannot stand alone.

[Example:] Until Captain Cooke returned from his voyage to Tahiti" (Rozakis, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Grammar and Style* 142).

If the above **independent** and **dependent clauses** were put together in a sentence, it would read: Until Captain Cooke returned from his voyage to Tahiti, tattooing was not known in the Western world.

Intensifiers? really, really tough?

"People are always looking for ways to emphasize how really, really special the subject under discussion is. (The use of 'really' is one of the weakest and least effective of these.) A host of words have been worn down in this service to near-meaninglessness. It is good to remember the etymological roots of such words to avoid such absurdities as 'fantastically realistic,' 'absolutely relative,' and 'incredibly convincing.' When you are tempted to use one of these vague intensifiers consider rewriting your prose to explain more precisely and vividly what you mean: 'Fred's cooking was incredibly bad' could be changed to 'When I tasted Fred's cooking I almost thought I was back in the middle-school cafeteria'" (Brians, *Common Errors in English Usage*).

Into or In to?

"**Into** is a preposition that has many definitions, but they all generally relate to direction. On the other hand, **in** by itself can be an adverb, preposition, or adjective (and **to** by itself is a preposition or an adverb). Sometimes **in** and **to** just end up next to each other.

Maybe examples will help!

He walked **into** the room.

(Which direction was he going? Into the room.)

We broke **in to** the room.

('Broke in' is a phrasal verb. What did you break in to? The room.)

(Fogarty, *Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips* 34-35).

Irony, Sarcasm, or Facetiousness?

Irony is "the use of words to express something different from and often opposite to their literal meaning." **Sarcasm** is "a cutting, often ironic remark intended to wound." By contrast, **facetiousness** is "playfully jocular; humorous." (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*)

It is I or It is me?

"Instead of the old choice between right and wrong we are now choosing a style; it is a choice that is much closer to the reality of usage than the old one way. [. . .] Clearly, both the **it is I** and **it's me** patterns are in reputable use and have been for a considerable time. **It is I** tends to be used in more formal or more stuffy situations; **it's me** predominates in real and fictional speech and in a more relaxed writing style" (*Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*).

It's her or It's she?

"In all but the most formal circumstances, it's OK to use **It is me**, **That's him**, **It's her**, and similar constructions, instead of the technically correct but stuffier **It is I**, **That's he**, and **It's she**" (O'Conner, *Woe Is I* 186).

Its or It's?

This one is simple if you remember that **it's** is a contraction of **it is** or **it has**.

Example: **It's** a beautiful morning; however, **it's** been an ugly season.

Its is the possessive form of **it**.

Example: It appeared the squirrel couldn't make up its mind whether or not to run across the street.

Lie or Lay ?

The verb **lay** means to place or to set down. It always takes a direct object, the thing that is placed or set down.

Examples: **Lay** the magazine on the table.

I have **laid** the bike under the tree.

The verb **lie** means to recline. It does not take a direct object.

Examples: I will **lie** down around noon.

Let's go **lie** out on the grass.

Like or Such as?

"Writers whom we respect disagree on whether there is any significant difference between **like** and **such as**. Wilson Follett and Theodore Bernstein say no. James J. Kilpatrick says yes. We come down gingerly on the side of Kilpatrick. His argument seems valid: 'When we are talking of large, indefinite fields of similarity, **like** properly may be used. . . . When we are talking about specifically named persons [places or things] . . . included in a small field, we ought to use **such as**.' In 'Books like this one can help you write better,' **like** means similar to. In 'Cities **such as** Atlanta and Birmingham are important to the economy of the Southeast,' the intent is to specify those cities as examples, not merely to put them into a broad category of cities that are important to the economy of the Southeast" (Lederer and Dowis, *Sleeping Dogs Don't Lay* 79).

Linking Verbs?

"**Linking verbs** link the subject to a subject complement, a word or word group that completes the meaning of the subject by renaming or describing it.

[Example:] The handwriting on the wall may be a forgery.

Linking verbs are usually a form of *be*: *be, am, is, are, was, were, being, been*. Verbs such as *appear, become, feel, grow, look, make, prove, remain, seem, smell, sound, and taste* are **linking** when they are followed by a word group that names or describes the subject" (Hacker, *A Writer's Reference* 500).

Littler and Littlest?

"Although occasionally used, both these forms [**littler, littlest**] are regarded as dialectical or perhaps as juvenile. When size is involved, the better forms are *smaller* and *smallest*; when quantity or importance is involved, the better forms are *less* (sometimes *lesser*) and *least*" (Bernstein, *The Careful Writer*).

Majority is or are?

"Many words that mean a group of things — *total, majority, and number*, for example — can be singular or plural. Sometimes they mean the group acting as a whole, sometimes the members of a group.

"As with the other two-faced words, ask yourself whether you are thinking of the whole or the parts. A little hint: *The* before the word (*the total, the majority*) is usually a tip-off that it's singular; while *a* (*a total, a number*), especially when *of* comes after, usually indicates a plural.

[Examples:] The **majority** is in charge. Still, a **majority** of voters are unhappy" (O'Conner, *Woe Is I* 26).

May or Might?

"These words occupy different places on a continuum of possibility. **May** expresses likelihood {we may go to the party}, while **might** expresses a stronger sense of doubt {we might be able to go if our appointment is cancelled} or a contrary-to-fact hypothetical {we might have been able to go if George hadn't gotten held up} (Garner, *The Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style*).

Me, Myself, or I?

"In the old days when people studied traditional grammar, we could simply say, 'The first person singular pronoun is **I** when it's a subject and **me** when it's an object,' but now few people know what that means. [. . .] The misuse of **I** and **myself** for **me** is caused by nervousness about **me**. [. . .] But the notion that there is something wrong with **me** leads people to overcorrect and avoid it where it is perfectly appropriate. People will say, 'The document had to be signed by both Susan and **I**' when the correct statement would be, 'The document had to be signed by both Susan and **me**.'

Trying even harder to avoid the lowly **me**, many people will substitute **myself** as in 'The suspect uttered epithets at Officer O'Leary and **myself**.' **Myself** is no better than **I** as an object. **Myself** is not a sort of all-purpose intensive form of **me** or **I**. Use **myself** only when you have used **I** earlier in the same sentence: 'I am not particularly fond of goat cheese **myself**'" (Brians, *Common Errors in English Usage*).

Mid- or just Mid?

"In forming compounds, **mid-** is normally joined to the following word or element without a space or hyphen: *midpoint*. However, if the second element begins with a capital letter, it is separated with a hyphen: *mid-May*. It is always acceptable to separate the elements with a hyphen to prevent possible confusion with another form, as, for example, to distinguish *mid-den* (the middle of a den) from the word *midden*. The adjective **mid** is a separate word, and as is the case with any adjective, it may be joined to another word with a hyphen when used as a unit modifier: *in the mid Pacific* but *a mid-Pacific Island*" (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*).

Mrs./Ms./Miss?

"**Ms.** is widely used in business and public life to address or refer to a woman, especially if her marital status is either unknown or irrelevant to the context. More traditionally, **Miss** is used to refer to an unmarried woman, and **Mrs.** is used to refer to a married woman. Some women may indicate a preference for **Ms.**, **Miss**, or **Mrs.**, which you should honor. If a woman has an academic or professional title, use the appropriate form of address (*Doctor, Professor, Captain*) instead of **Ms.**, **Miss**, or **Mrs.**" (Alfred, Brusaw, and Oliu, *The Technical Writer's Companion* 297).

None is or None are?

"**None** has been both singular and plural since Old English and still is. [. . .] If in context it seems like a singular to you, use a singular verb; if it seems like a plural, use a plural verb. Both are acceptable beyond serious criticism" (*Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*).

Numbers: When to spell out and When to write as numbers?

"Spell out numbers of one or two words or those that begin a sentence. Use figures for numbers that require more than two words to spell out.

[Examples:] It's been eight years since I visited Peru. I counted 176 DVDs on the shelf.

If a sentence begins with a number, spell out the number or rewrite the sentence.

[Example:] One hundred fifty children in our program need expensive dental treatment.

Exceptions: In technical and some business writing, figures are preferred even when spellings would be brief, but usage varies. When in doubt, consult the style guide of the organization for which you are writing.

When several numbers appear in the same passage, many writers choose consistency rather than strict adherence to the rule.

When one number immediately follows another, spell out one and use figures for the other: *three 100-meter events, 25 four-poster beds*.

Generally figures are acceptable for dates, addresses, percentages, fractions, decimals, scores, statistics and other numerical results, exact amounts of money, divisions of books and plays, pages, identification numbers, and the time.

Dates July 4, 1776, 56 BC, AD 30

Addresses 77 Latches Lane, 519 West 42nd Street

Percentages 55 percent (or 55%)

Fractions, Decimals ½, 0.047

Scores 7 to 3, 21-18

Statistics average age 37, average weight 180

Surveys 4 out of 5

Exact Amounts of Money \$105.37, \$106,000

Divisions of Books volume 3, chapter 4, page 189

Divisions of Plays act 3; scene 3 (or act III, scene iii)

Identification Numbers serial number 10988675

Time of Day 4:00 p.m., 1:30 a.m. (Hacker, *A Writer's Reference* 310-311).

OK or Okay?

Both **OK** and **okay** are acceptable in informal writing; however, avoid them in formal writing.

On or Upon?/In or Into?

On/upon and **in/into** are equally interchangeable according to the *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*.

Parallelism?

"**Parallelism** is the expression of similar or related ideas in similar grammatical form. Besides emphasizing the relationships of ideas, parallelism can create intriguing sentence rhythms and highlights." "Once you begin a parallel pattern, you need to complete it. If you mix structures, creating incomplete or **faulty parallelism**, your sentences may disappoint readers' expectations and be hard to read.

Mixed Consider swimming if you want an exercise that *aids* cardiovascular fitness, *develops* overall muscle strength, and *probably without causing* injuries.

Parallel Consider swimming if you want an exercise that *aids* cardiovascular fitness, *develops* overall muscle strength, and *causes* few injuries."(Anson, Schwegler, and Muth, *The Longman Writer's Companion* 396-397)

Parenthetical Documentation?

To obtain the information for your specific documentation style, go to [Dr. Grammar's Documentation Resources page](#) and click on the appropriate website.

Plurals of Abbreviations, Letters, and Numbers?

"No two authorities seem to agree on how we should form the plurals of abbreviations (*GI, rpm, RBI*), letters (*x, y, z*), and numbers (*9, 10*). Should we had *s* or *'s*? Where one style maven sees *UFO's*, another sees *UFOs*. One is nostalgic for the *1950's*, the other for the *1950s*. This is more a matter of taste and readability than of grammar, and frankly, we have better things to worry about. For the sake of consistency and common sense, here's what I recommend. To form the plurals of all numbers, letters, and abbreviation (with or without periods and capitals) simply add *'s*" (*O'Conner, Woe Is I* 30).

Plurals of Proper Names?

"Here are a few rules that will help the curious pluralize proper names. Please note that, in every case, the spellings of the proper names should not change except for the addition of *-s* or *-es*.

"With proper names ending in a sound that blends well with *s*, simply add *-s*.

Brown = the Browns Lindberg = the Lindbergs Ericson = the Ericsons Shaw = the Shaws
Hogan = the Hogans Whitlock = the Whitlocks

"With proper nouns ending in sounds that don't blend well with *s*, the sibilant sounds, add *-es*.

Cox = the Coxes Jones = the Joneses Douglas = the Douglasses Martinez = the Martinezes
Firch = the Firches Nemetz = the Nemetzes"

(Strumpf and Douglas, *The Grammar Bible* 15-16).

Possessive with a Gerund?

A **gerund** is a verb form ending in *-ing* that functions as a noun.

Example: *Crying* is good for you.

When a pronoun modifies a **gerund** or **gerund phrase**, use the possessive case (my, our, your, his/her/its, their).

Example: *Your crying* made me sad. Nouns may also modify gerunds; add *-s* to form the possessive case.

Example: The *dog's* suffering angered me.

Preposition at end?

"If a sentence that ends with a preposition sounds fine and makes sense, by all means, write the sentence. It is absolutely antiquated to forbid ending a sentence with a preposition. However, it is always possible to reword the sentence" (Strumpf and Douglas, *The Grammar Bible* 214-215).

Proportional or Proportionate?

Both are correct and neither is preferred.

Punctuation of Dates?

"Put a comma between the data and the year, between the day of the week and the date, and after the year when you give a full date.

[Example:] I ordered a laptop on May 3, 2007, that arrived Friday, May 18.

You don't need commas when a date is inverted (5 July 1973) or contains only month and year, month and day, or season and year.

[Example:] We installed the software after its June 2007 test. (Anson, Schwegler, and Muth, *The Longman Writer's Companion* 429)

Quotation Marks and Other Punctuation

There are three basic rules.

1. All **commas** and **periods** should be placed *inside* the quotation marks.
2. All **colons** and **semicolons** should be placed *outside* the quotation marks.
3. **Question marks** and **exclamation marks** should be placed *within* the quotation marks when they apply only to the quoted material; they should be placed *outside* when the entire sentence, including the quoted material, is a question or exclamation.

Reason is because?

"**Reason is because** is a redundancy. Use *reason is that* The reason we recommend 'reason is that' is that the grammatical subject, *reason*, is balanced by a noun clause in the predicate, headed by *that*" (Lederer and Dowis, *Sleeping Dogs Don't Lay* 51).

Regular and Irregular Verbs?

"A **verb is regular** when its past tense and past participle are formed by adding *-ed* or *-d* to the base form.

[Example:] honor, honored, honored.

A verb is irregular when it does not follow the (*-ed* or *-d* pattern. If you are unsure about whether a verb form is regular or irregular, or what the correct form is, consult [. . .] a dictionary. Dictionaries list any irregular forms under the entry for the base form" (Lunsford, *The Everyday Writer* 230).

Semicolon use?

"A **semicolon** creates a brief reading pause that can dramatically highlight a close relationship or a contrast. The semicolon alone can't specify the relationship the way words like *because* or *however* can. Be sure, therefore, that the relationship you are signaling won't be puzzling to readers."

"Join two sentences with a semicolon. A semicolon joins main clauses that can stand alone as complete sentences.

[Example:] The demand for paper is at an all-time high; businesses alone consume millions of tons each year."

"Use a semicolon with words such as *however* and *on the other hand*. When you use a semicolon alone to link main clauses, you ask readers to recognize the logical link between the clauses. When you add

words like *however* or *on the other hand*, you create a different effect on readers by specifying how the clauses relate.

[Example:] I like apples; however, I hate pears."

"Use a semicolon with a complex series. When items in a series contain commas, readers may have trouble deciding which commas separate parts of the series and which belong within items. To avoid confusion, put semicolons between elements in a series when one or more contain other punctuation.

[Example:] I interviewed Debbie Rios, the attorney; Rhonda Marron, the accountant; and the financial director." (Anson, Schwegler, and Muth, *The Longman Writer's Companion* 432-433)

Set or Sit?

Set is a verb meaning "to put" or "to place."

Example: He **set** the urn on the table.

Sit is a verb meaning "to be seated."

Example: He **sat** on the couch next to the dog.

Shall or Will?

"**Will** has almost entirely replaced **shall** in American English except in legal documents and in questions like "Shall we have red wine with the duck?" (Brians, *Common Errors in English Usage*)

Sic?

"In scholarly writing you should copy quotations exactly as they appear in your source, but you must also produce a paper free of grammatical and mechanical errors. So how should you handle a source that contains an error? One way is to rephrase the quotation in your own words, crediting your source for the idea. However, if the quotation is so eloquent or effective that you decide to include it despite the error, use **[sic]** (an abbreviation of the Latin *sicut*, meaning *thus*) to indicate that the original source is responsible for the mistake.

[Example:] 'One taste tester reported that the Carb Charge energy bar was to **[sic]** dry; she said it had the consistency of sawdust' (Cisco 22)." (Faigley, *The Brief Penguin Handbook* 496)

Single quotation marks?

"**Single quotation marks** enclose a quotation within a quotation. Open and close the quoted passage with double quotation marks, and change any quotation marks that appear *within* the quotation to single quotation marks.

[Example:] Baldwin says, "The title 'The Uses of the Blues' does not refer to music; I don't know anything about music." (Lunsford, *The Everyday Writer* 338)

Spacing after concluding marks of punctuation?

Until recently, there were two spaces after concluding punctuation. It is now common to use one space after concluding punctuation. Either one space or two spaces is correct; however, be consistent in whatever spacing you use.

Split infinitives?

"Today almost everyone agrees that it is OK to split infinitives, especially when you would have to change the meaning of the sentence or go through writing gymnastics to avoid the split."

(Fogarty, *Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips* 56)

Than I/Than me?

"Some of the smartest people I know hesitate at the word **than** when it comes before a pronoun. What goes next, **I** or **me**? *he* or *him*? *she* or *her*? *they* or *them*?"

The answer: All of the above! This is easier than it sounds. Take **I** and **me** as examples, since they're the pronouns we use most (egotists that we are). Either one may be correct after **than**, depending on the meaning of the sentence.

- *Trixie loves spaghetti **more than I** means more than I do.*
- *Trixie loves spaghetti **more than me** means more than she loves me."*

(O'Conner, *Woe Is I* 12)

That or Which or Who?

Do not use **which** to refer to persons. Use **who** instead. **That**, though generally used to refer to things, may be used to refer to a group or class of people.

[Examples:] The player **who** [not **that** or **which**] made the basket at the buzzer was named MVP.

The team **that** scores the most points in this game will win the tournament (Hacker, *A Writer's Reference* 136).

The faculty is or The faculty are?

Faculty is a collective noun. "A collective noun is singular in form yet identifies a group of individuals (*audience, mob, crew, troop, tribe, or herd*). When the group acts as a single unit, choose a singular verb. When group members act individually, choose a plural verb.

[Examples:] *One Single Unit*: The *staff* is hardworking and well trained.

Individual Members: The *staff* have earned the respect of our clients."

(Anson, Schwegler, and Muth, *The Longman Writer's Companion* 355).

Then or Than?

Than is used to indicate comparison or degree.

Example: His drive was longer **than** mine.

Then is used to indicate time.

Example: **Then** he putted out and won the tournament.

Thru or Through?

Through is acceptable in all forms of writing.

Thru, if used at all, should be used only for informal writing.

To, Too, or Two?

"**To** generally shows direction.

Too means 'also.'

Two is the number.

[Example:] We, **too**, are going **to** the meeting in **two** hours." (Lunsford, *The Everyday Writer* 313).

Toward(s), Forward(s), Backward(s)?

"No final *s* ('towards'), although that's how they say it in Britain. Similarly, in American English, standard practice is not to add a final *s* to *forward, backward, upward, onward, downward*, and so on.

[Example:] George and Karter were last seen heading **toward** the buffet." (O'Conner, *Who Is I* 117-118).

Transitive verb or Intransitive verb?

"Any verb that requires a direct object is known as a **transitive verb**.

[Example:] I *trim* the lawn. (The noun *lawn* receives the action of the verb, the trimming. The verb *trim* is a transitive verb.)

[Example:] I *taught* the children. (The noun *children* receives the action of the verb, the teaching. The verb *taught* is also a transitive verb.)

Verbs that do not take objects are **intransitive verbs**.

[Example:] We shall *run* when we get the chance. (No word receives the action of this verb.

Therefore, *run* is an intransitive verb.)

[Example:] We *stayed* at the Ritz. (No noun or pronoun receives the action of this verb either. It is intransitive.)" (Strumpf and Douglas, *The Grammar Bible* 71).

Try and or Try to?

"The phrase **try and** is colloquial for **try to**. [. . .]
to

[Example:] Please try and finish the report on time." (Alred, Brusaw, and Oliu, *The Business Writer's Handbook*).

Unique or More unique?

"The primary meaning of **unique** is 'one of a kind'; it's an absolute, so something can't be more unique than something else." (Fogarty, *Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips* 66).

Who or Whom?

"The words **who** and **whom** are both pronouns [, . . and] you use **who** when you are referring to the subject of a clause and **whom** when you are referring to the object of a clause. [. . . A] simple memory trick — we'll call it the 'him-lich' maneuver. It's as easy as testing your sentence with the word *him*: if you can hypothetically answer your question with the word *him*, you need a **whom**." (Fogarty, *Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips* 50-51).

[Example:] **Who/Whom** do you love? You love *him*. **Whom** do you love? (51)

RESOURCE:

<http://www.drgrammar.org/frequently-asked-questions>