Problematic Words and Phrases

Many of the words below are often incorrectly used, usually because they sound similar to one another, or infer similar meaning; others are incorrectly used in the singular (when they should be in the plural) or vice versa. Their definitions and appropriate usage are outlined in detail so as to help writers decide when to use them.¹

ability; capability; capacity Ability refers to a person’s physical or mental skill or power to achieve something (the ability to ride a bicycle). Capability refers more generally to power or ability (she has the capability to play soccer professionally) or to the quality of being able to use or be used in a certain way (a jet with long-distance-flight capability). Capacity refers especially to a vessel’s ability to hold or contain something (a high-capacity fuel tank). Used figuratively, capacity refers to a person’s physical or mental power to learn (an astounding capacity for mathematics).

accord; accordance The first word means “agreement” (we are in accord on the treaty’s meaning); the second word means “conformity” (the book was printed in accordance with modern industry standards).

addicted; dependent One is physically addicted to something but psychologically dependent on something.

adduce; deduce; induce To adduce is to give as a reason, offer as a proof, or cite as an example (as evidence of reliability, she adduced her four years of steady volunteer work as a nurse’s aide). Deduce and induce are opposite processes. To deduce is to reason from general principles to specific conclusions, or to draw a specific conclusion from general bases (from these clues about who committed the crime, one deduces that the butler did it). To induce is to form a general principle based on specific observations (after years of studying ravens, the researchers induced a few of their social habits).

adequate; sufficient; enough Adequate refers to the suitability of something in a particular circumstance (an adequate explanation). Sufficient refers to an amount that is enough to meet a need (always with an abstract concept, a mass noun, or a plural) (sufficient water) (sufficient information) (sufficient cause) (sufficient resources). Enough, the best word for everyday purposes, modifies both count nouns (enough people) and mass nouns (enough oil).

admission; admittance Admission is figurative, suggesting particularly the rights and privileges granted upon entry (the student won admission to a first-rate university). Admittance is purely physical (no admittance beyond this point).

adverse; averse Adverse means either “strongly opposed” or “unfortunate” and typically refers to things, not people (adverse relations between nations) (an adverse wind blew the ship off course). Averse means “feeling negatively about” and refers to people (averse to asking for directions).

affect; effect Affect, almost always a verb, means “to influence, have an effect on” (the adverse publicity affected the election). (The noun affect has a specialised meaning in psychology: manifestation of emotion or mood. Consult your dictionary.) Effect, usually a noun, means “outcome, result” (the candidate’s attempted explanations had no effect). But it may also be a verb meaning “to make happen, produce” (the goal had been to effect a major change in campus politics).

afterward, adv.; afterword, n. The first means “later”; the second means “an epilogue.” On afterward(s), see toward.

¹ This is sourced from the Chicago Manual of Style, 16th ed. (Chicago and London; University of Chicago Press, 2010), 263–300.
allude; elude; illude To allude is to refer to something indirectly (allude to a problem). It’s often loosely used where refer or quote would be better—that is, where there is a direct mention or quotation. To elude is to avoid capture (elude the hunters). To illude (quite rare) is to deceive (your imagination might illude you).

alternate, adj. & n.; alternative, adj. & n. Alternate implies (1) substitute for another (we took the alternate route) or (2) taking turns with another (her alternate chaired the meeting). Alternative implies a choice between two or more things (I prefer the second alternative).

amend; emend The first is the general term, meaning “to change or add to” (the city amended its charter to abolish at-large council districts). The second means “to correct [text]” (for the second printing, the author emended several typos). The noun corresponding to amend is amendment; the one corresponding to emend is emendation.

amiable; amicable Both mean “friendly,” but amiable refers to people (an amiable waiter) and amicable to relationships (an amicable divorce).

amount; number Amount is used with mass nouns (a decrease in the amount of pollution), number with count nouns (a growing number of dissidents).

assumption; presumption An assumption is not drawn from evidence; typically, it is a hypothesis (your assumption can be tested by looking at the public records). A presumption implies a basis in evidence; if uncontradicted, a presumption may support a decision (the legal presumption of innocence).

attain; obtain To attain something is to accomplish it through effort (e.g., a goal) or endurance (e.g., an age); to obtain something is to gain possession of it. So in best usage you attain a degree and obtain a diploma. It can be a fine distinction, and in common usage the words are often treated as synonyms.

between; among; amid Between indicates one-to-one relationships (between you and me). Among indicates undefined or collective relationships (honour among thieves). Between has long been recognised as being perfectly appropriate for more than two objects if multiple one-to-one relationships are understood from the context (trade between members of the European Union). Amid is used with mass nouns (amid talk of war), among with plurals of count nouns (among the children). Avoid amidst and amongst.

born; borne Born is used only as an adjective (a born ruler) or in the fixed passive-voice verb to be born (the child was born into poverty). Borne is the past participle of bear (this donkey has borne many heavy loads) (she has borne three children). It is also used to form compound terms in the sciences (foodborne) (vector-borne).

bring; take The distinction may seem obvious, but the error is common. The simple question is, where is the action directed? If it’s toward you, use bring (bring home the bacon). If it’s away from you, use take (take out the trash). You take (not bring) your car to the mechanic.

can; could Can means “to be able to” and expresses certainty (I can be there in five minutes). Could is better for a sense of uncertainty or a conditional statement (Could you stop at the cleaners today?) (if you send a deposit, we could hold your reservation).

can; may Can most traditionally applies to physical or mental ability (she can do calculations in her head) (the dog can leap over a six-foot fence). In colloquial English, can also expresses a request for permission (Can I go to the movies?), but this usage is not recommended in formal writing. May suggests possibility (the class may have a pop quiz tomorrow) or permission (you may borrow my car). A denial of permission is properly phrased formally with may not (you may not borrow my credit card) or with cannot or can’t (you can’t use the computer tonight).
capital; capitol A capital is a seat of government (usually a city) (Austin is the capital of Texas). A capitol is a building in which a legislature meets (the legislature opened its new session in the capitol today).

career; careen The word career’s career as a verb meaning “to go full speed” may be about over. Its duties have been assumed by careen (“to tip to one side while moving”), even though nothing in that verb’s definition denotes high speed. Still, careful writers recognise the distinction.

cite, n.; site As a noun, cite is colloquial for citation, which refers to a source of information (a cite to Encyclopaedia Britannica). A site is a place or location (building site) (grave site) (website). Cf. sight.

citizen; subject In a governmental sense, these are near-synonyms that should be distinguished. A citizen owes allegiance to a nation whose sovereignty is a collective function of the people (a citizen of Germany). A subject owes allegiance to an individual sovereign (a subject of the queen).

class This word denotes a category or group of things (the class of woodwind instruments), never one type (an oboe is a type of woodwind) or one kind of thing (a snare drum is one kind of percussion instrument).

classic; classical Classic means “important, authoritative” (The Naked Night is one of Bergman’s classic films). Classical applies to the traditional “classics” of literature, music, and such (and sometimes to specific periods and movements) (classical Greek) (a classical composer) or to the definitive or earliest-characterised form (classical EEC syndrome).

collaborate; corroborate To collaborate means to cooperate on some undertaking; the participants are collaborators. To corroborate something means to back up its reliability with proof or evidence.

compare To compare with is to discern both similarities and differences between things. To compare to is to note primarily similarities between things.

compelled; impelled If you are compelled to do something, you have no choice in the matter (Nixon was compelled by the unanimous Supreme Court decision to turn over the tapes). If you are impelled to do something, you may not like it, but you are convinced that it must be done (the voter disliked some candidates but was impelled by the income-tax issue to vote a straight party ticket).

compliment; complement A compliment is a flattering or praising remark (a compliment on your skill). A complement is something that completes or brings to perfection (the lace tablecloth was a complement to the antique silver). The words are also verbs: to compliment is to praise, while to complement is to supplement adequately or to complete.

comprise; compose Use these with care. To comprise is “to be made up of, to include” (the whole comprises the parts). To compose is “to make up, to form the substance of something” (the parts compose the whole). The phrase comprised of, though increasingly common, is poor usage. Instead, use composed of, consisting of, or made up of.

concept; conception Both words may refer to an abstract thought, but conception also means “the act of forming an abstract thought.” Avoid using either word as a high-sounding equivalent of idea, design, thought, or program.

consist There are two distinct phrases: consist of and consist in. The first applies to the physical components that make up a tangible thing (the computer-system package consists of software, the CPU, the monitor, and a printer). The second refers to the essence of a
thing, especially in abstract terms (moral government consists in rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked).

**contagious; infectious** A contagious disease spreads by direct contact with an infected person or animal (rabies is a contagious disease). An infectious disease is spread by germs on a contaminated object or element, such as earth or water (tetanus is infectious but not contagious). In nonliteral usage the terms are synonymous (his pessimism is contagious) (her smile is infectious).

**contemporary; contemporaneous** Both express coinciding time, but contemporary usually applies to people, and contemporaneous applies to things or actions. Because contemporary has the additional sense “modern,” it is unsuitable for contexts involving multiple times. That is, a reference to Roman, Byzantine, and contemporary belief systems is ambiguous; change contemporary to modern.

**continual; continuous** What is continual is intermittent or frequently repeated. What is continuous never stops—it remains constant or uninterrupted.

**contravene; controvert** To contravene is to conflict with or violate (the higher speed limit contravenes our policy of encouraging fuel conservation). To controvert is to challenge or contradict (the testimony controverts the witness’s prior statement).

**corporal; corporeal** What is corporal relates in some way to the body (corporal punishment); what is corporeal has a body (not our spiritual but our corporeal existence).

**criteria** This is the plural form of criterion (“a standard for judging”): one criterion, two criteria.

**data** Though originally this word was a plural of datum, it is now commonly treated as a mass noun and coupled with a singular verb. In formal writing (and always in the sciences), use data as a plural.

**deadly; deathly** Deadly means “capable of causing death” (deadly snake venom). Deathly means “deathlike” (deathly silence).

**decide whether; decide if** See determine whether.

**definite; definitive.** Definite means “clear, exact” (a definite yes). Definitive means “conclusive, final, most authoritative” (a definitive treatise).

**despite; in spite of.** For brevity, prefer despite.

**determine whether; determine if.** The first phrasing is irreproachable style; the second is acceptable as a colloquialism. The same is true of decide whether versus decide if. See also if.

**different** The phrasing different from is generally preferable to different than (this company is different from that one), but sometimes the adverbial phrase differently than is all but required (she described the scene differently than he did).

**differ from; differ with** Differ from is the usual construction denoting a contrast (the two species differ from each other in subtle ways). Differ with regards differences of opinion (the state’s senators differ with each other on many issues).

**discreet; discrete** Discreet means “circumspect, judicious” (a discreet silence). Discrete means “separate, distinct, unconnected” (six discrete parts).

**disinterested** This word should be reserved for the sense “not having a financial personal interest at stake, impartial” (and it is a term commonly used in art history and aesthetics). Avoid it as a replacement for uninterested (which means “unconcerned, bored”).

**disorganised; unorganised** Both mean “not organised,” but disorganised suggests a group in disarray, either thrown into confusion or inherently unable to work together (the disorganised 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago).
dive, vb. The preferred conjugation is dive–dived–dived. Do not use dove.

dream Use dreamt for the past-tense and past-participial forms.

drink, vb. Correctly conjugated drink–drank–drunk (they had not drunk any fruit juice that day).


due to. In strict traditional usage, due to should be interchangeable with attributable to (the erratic driving was due to some prescription drugs that the driver had taken). When used adverbially, due to is often considered inferior to because of or owing to. So in the sentence due to the parents’ negligence, the entire family suffered, the better phrasing would be because of [or owing to] the parents’ negligence, the entire family suffered.
dumb This word means either “stupid” or “unable to speak.” In the second sense, mute is clearer for most modern readers.
each other; one another. Traditionalists use each other when two things or people are involved, one another when more than two are involved.
economic; economical Economic means “of or relating to large-scale finances” (federal economic policy). Economical means “thrifty; financially efficient” (an economical purchase).
elicit; illicit Elicit (“to draw out [an answer, information, etc.]”) is a verb (to elicit responses); illicit (“illegal”) is an adjective (an illicit scheme). Writers often mistakenly use illicit when they mean elicit.
elude See allude.
emend See amend.
emigrate See immigrate.
enumerable; innumerable What’s enumerable is countable. What’s innumerable can’t be counted, at least not practically (innumerable stars in the sky).
epidemic; endemic; pandemic. An epidemic disease breaks out, spreads through a limited area (such as a state), and then subsides (an epidemic outbreak of measles). (The word is frequently used as a noun (a measles epidemic).) An endemic disease is perennially present within a region or population (malaria is endemic in parts of Africa). (Note that endemic describes a disease and not a region: it is incorrect to say this region is endemic for [a disease].) A pandemic disease is prevalent over a large area, such as a nation or continent, or the entire world (the 1918–19 flu pandemic).
every day, adv.; everyday, adj. The first is adverbial, the second adjectival. One may wear one’s everyday clothes every day.
every one; everyone The two-word version is an emphatic way of saying “each” (every one of them was there); the second is a pronoun equivalent to everybody (everyone was there).
evoke; invoke To evoke something is to bring it out (evoke laughter) or bring to mind (evoke childhood memories). Invoke has a number of senses, including to assert (something) as authority (invoke martial law), to appeal (to someone or a higher power) for help (invoke an ally to intervene), or to conjure up (invoke spirits of the past).
exceptional; exceptional What is exceptional is uncommon, superior, rare, or extraordinary (an exceptional talent). What is exceptional is objectionable or offensive (an exceptional slur).
explicit; implicit If something is explicit it is deliberately spelled out, as in the writing of a contract or the text of a statute. If it is implicit it is not specifically stated but either is suggested in the wording or is necessary to effectuate the purpose. Avoid implicit to mean “complete, unmitigated.”
fact that, the This much-maligned phrase is not always avoidable. But hunt for a substitute before deciding to use it. Sometimes that alone suffices.

farther; further The traditional distinction is to use farther for a physical distance (we drove farther north to see the autumn foliage) and further for a figurative distance (let’s examine this further) (look no further).

fewer See less. flounder; founder Keep the figurative meanings of these terms straight by remembering their literal meanings. To flounder is to struggle awkwardly, as though walking through deep mud (the professor glared while the unprepared student floundered around for an answer). To founder is to sink or fall to the ground (without any editorial expertise, the publisher soon foundered).

following Avoid this word as an equivalent of after. Consider: Following the presentation, there was a question-and-answer session. After is both simpler and clearer. But following is unobjectionable in meaning “next” (the following example illustrates the point).

foreword; preface A foreword (not forward) is a brief essay of endorsement that is written by someone other than the book’s author. An introductory essay about the book written by the book’s author is called a preface and is usually shorter and more personal than the book’s introduction, which gives an overview of the book’s content. See 1.39, 1.40, 1.42, 1.46.

former; latter In the best usage, these words apply only to pairs. The former is the first of two, the latter the second of two.

get Though shunned by many writers as too casual, get often sounds more natural than obtain or procure (get a job). It can also substitute for a stuffy become (get hurt). The verb is conjugated get–got–gotten in American English, get–got–got in British English.

go This verb is conjugated go–went–gone. Went appears as a past participle only in dialect.

guild, n.; gild, vb. A guild is an organization of persons with a common interest or profession (a guild of fine carpenters). To gild is to put a thin layer of gold on something (gild a picture frame).

hanged; hung Hanged is used as the past participle of hang only in its transitive form when referring to the killing (just or unjust) of a human being by suspending the person by the neck (criminals were hanged at Tyburn Hill). But if death is not intended or likely, or if the person is suspended by a body part other than the neck, hung is correct (he was hung upside down as a cruel prank). In most senses, of course, hung is the past form of hang (Mark hung up his clothes). All inanimate objects, such as pictures and Christmas stockings, are hung.

historic; historical The shorter word refers to what is momentous in history (January 16, 1991, was a historic day in Kuwait). Historical, meanwhile, refers simply to anything that pertains to or occurred in history.

home in This phrase is frequently misrendered hone in. (Hone means “to sharpen.”) Home in refers to what homing pigeons do; the meaning is “to come closer and closer to a target.”

if; whether While if is conditional, whether introduces an alternative, often in the context of an indirect question. Use whether in two circumstances: (1) to introduce a noun clause (he asked whether his tie was straight) (the answer is either yes or no), and (2) when using if would produce ambiguity. In the sentence He asked if his tie was straight, the literal meaning is “whenever his tie was straight, he asked”; the popular meaning “he wanted someone to tell him whether his tie needed straightening” may not be understood by all readers. More tellingly, call me to let me know if you can come means that you should call only if you’re coming; call to let me know whether you can come means that you should call regardless of your answer. Avoid substituting if for whether unless your tone is intentionally informal or you are quoting someone. See also determine whether.
immigrate; emigrate To immigrate is to enter a country to live, leaving a past home. To emigrate is to leave one country to live in another one. The cognate forms also demand attention. Someone who moves from Ireland to the United States is an immigrant here and an emigrant there. An emigré is also an emigrant, but especially one in political exile.

imply; infer The writer or speaker implies (hints, suggests); the reader or listener infers (deduces). Writers and speakers often use infer as if it were synonymous with imply, but careful writers always distinguish between the two words.

in connection with This is a vague, fuzzy phrase (she explained the financial consequences in connection with the transaction) (a liking for everything in connection with golf) (Phipson was compensated in connection with its report). Try replacing the phrase with of, related to, or associated with (she explained the financial consequences of the transaction), about (a liking for everything about golf), or for (Phipson was compensated for its report).

ingenious; ingenuous These words are similar in form but not in meaning. Ingenious describes what is intelligent, clever, and original (an ingenious invention). Ingenuous describes what is candid, naive, and without dissimulation (a hurtful but ingenuous observation).

innate; inherent An innate characteristic is one that a living thing has from birth; it should be distinguished, then, from a talent or disposition that one acquires from training or experience. An inherent characteristic is also part of a thing’s nature, but life is not implied; a rock, for example, has an inherent hardness.

in order to; in order for Often these expressions can be reduced to to and for. When that is so, and rhythm and euphony are preserved or even heightened, use to or for.

in regard to This is the phrase, not in regards to. Try a single-word substitute instead: about, regarding, concerning.

in spite of See despite.

intense; intensive Intense is preferred in reference to colours, emotions, and personal efforts. Intensive describes concentration of attention and resources and is more often used to refer to work or study methods (labour-intensive) (intensive care).

in the affirmative See affirmative, in the.

in the event that See event.

in the near future See future.

in the negative See affirmative, in the.

irregardless An error. Use regardless (or possibly irrespective).

it is I; it is me Both are correct and acceptable. The first phrase is strictly grammatical (and stuffy); the second is idiomatic (and relaxed), and it is often contracted to it’s me. In the third-person constructions, however, a greater stringency holds sway in good English (this is he) (it isn’t she who has caused such misery).

its; it's Its is the possessive form of it; it’s is the contraction for it is (it’s a sad dog that scratches its fleas).

lay; lie Lay is a transitive verb—that is, it demands a direct object (lay your pencils down). It is inflected lay–laid–lain (I laid the book there yesterday) (these rumours have been laid to rest). (The children’s prayer Now I lay me down to sleep is a good mnemonic device for the transitive lay.) Lie is an intransitive verb—that is, it never takes a direct object (lie down and rest). It is inflected lie–lay–lain (she lay down and rested) (he hasn’t yet lain down).

less; fewer Use less for amounts or mass nouns; for example, less salt, dirt, water. Use fewer for countable things; for example, fewer people, calories, suggestions. One easy guideline is to
use less with singular nouns (such as less money) and fewer with plural nouns (such as fewer dollars).

like; as The use of like as a conjunction (as in the old jingle “like a cigarette should”) has long been a contentious issue. Purists insist that as must introduce a clause and like must always be a preposition coupled with a noun (cool like spring water). The fall of that old rule has been predicted for five decades, but today like as a conjunction is still not standard.

literally This word means “actually; without exaggeration.” It should not be used loosely as an intensifier, as in they were literally glued to their seats (unless glue had in fact been applied).

masterful; masterly Masterful describes a person who is dominating and imperious. Masterly describes a person who has mastered a craft, trade, or profession; the word often means “authoritative” (a masterly analysis). Because masterly does not readily make an adverb (masterlily being extremely awkward), try in a masterly way.

may; can See can.

may; might May expresses what is possible, is factual, or could be factual (I may have turned off the stove, but I can’t recall doing it). Might suggests something that is uncertain, hypothetical, or contrary to fact (I might have won the marathon if I had entered).

much; very Much generally intensifies past-participial adjectives (much obliged) (much encouraged) and some comparatives (much more) (much worse)(much too soon). Very intensifies adverbs and most adjectives (very carefully) (very bad), including past-participial adjectives that have more adjectival than verbal force (very bored). Try to avoid both.

myself Avoid using myself as a pronoun in place of I or me. Use it reflexively (I did myself a favour) or emphatically (I myself have tried to get through that tome!).

none This word may take either a singular or a plural verb. A guideline: if it is followed by a singular noun, treat it as a singular (none of the building was painted); if by a plural noun, treat it as a plural (none of the guests were here when I arrived). But for special emphasis, it is quite proper (though possibly stilted) to use a singular verb when a plural noun follows (none of the edits was accepted).

notwithstanding One word. Less formal alternatives include despite, although, and in spite of. The word notwithstanding may precede or follow a noun(notwithstanding her bad health, she decided to run for office) (her bad health notwithstanding, she decided to run for office).

off Never put of after this word (we got off the bus).

on; upon Prefer on to upon unless introducing an event or condition (put that on the shelf, please) (upon the job’s completion, you’ll get paid). For more about on, see onto.

on behalf of See behalf.

one another See each other.

oneself One word—not one’s self.

onto; on to; on When is on a preposition and when is it an adverb? The sense of the sentence should tell, but the distinction can be subtle. Ono implies a movement, so it has an adverbial flavour even though it is a preposition (the gymnast jumped onto the bars). When on is part of the verbal phrase, it is an adverb and to is the preposition (the gymnast held on to the bars). One trick is to mentally say “up” before on: if the sentence still makes sense, then onto is probably the right choice. Alone, on does not imply motion (the gymnast is good on the parallel bars).

oppress; repress Oppress, meaning “to persecute or tyrannise,” is more negative than repress, meaning “to restrain or subordinate.”
orient; orientate To orient is to get one’s bearings or point another in the right direction (literally to find east) (it took the new employee a few days to get oriented to the firm’s suite). Unless used in the sense “to face or turn to the east,” orientate is a poor variation to be avoided. It is a back-formation from the noun orientation, analogous to the illegitimate interpretate for interpret.

ought; should Both express a sense of duty, but ought is stronger. Unlike should, ought requires a fully expressed infinitive, even in the negative (you ought not to see the movie).

overly Avoid this word, which is widely considered poor usage. Try over- as a prefix or unduly.

partake in; partake of To partake in is to participate in (the new student refused to partake in class discussions). To partake of is either to get a part of (partake of the banquet) or to have a quality, at least to some extent (this assault partakes of revenge).

partly; partially Both words convey the sense “to some extent; in part” (partly disposed of). Partly is preferred in that sense. But partially has the additional senses of “incompletely” (partially cooked) and “unfairly; in a way that shows bias toward one side” (he treats his friends partially).

pastime This word combines pass (not past) and time, and is spelled with a single t.

penultimate This word means “the next to last.” Many people have started misusing it as a fancy equivalent of ultimate.

practice, n.; practise, v. Practice is the noun (her artistic practice generates her main source of income); practise is the verb (she practised her newly learnt drawing technique).

presently This word is ambiguous. Write now or soon, whichever you really mean.

principle; principal A principle is a natural, moral, or legal rule (the principle of free speech). The corresponding adjective is principled (a principled decision). A principal is a person of high authority or prominence (a school principal) or a loan amount requiring repayment (principal and interest). A principal role is a primary one.

prior to Make it before or until.

process of, in the You can almost always delete this phrase without affecting the meaning.

prophesy; prophecy Prophesy is the verb (the doomsayers prophesied widespread blackouts for Y2K). Prophecy is the noun (their prophecies did not materialise). Prophesise is an erroneous form sometimes encountered.

question whether; question of whether; question as to whether The first phrasing is the best, the second is next best, and the third is to be avoided. See as to.

quick(ly) Quickly is the general adverb. But quick is properly used as an adverb in the idiomatic phrases get rich quick and come quick.

quote; quotation Traditionally a verb, quote is often used as an equivalent of quotation in speech and informal writing. Also, there is a tendency for writers (especially journalists) to think of quotes as contemporary remarks usable in their writing and of quotations as being wisdom of the ages expressed pithily.

rein; reign A rein (usu. plural) controls a horse; it is the right word in idioms such as “take the reins,” “give free rein,” and, as a verb, “rein in.” A reign is a state of or term of dominion, especially that of a monarch but by extension dominance in some field. This is the right word in idioms such as “reign of terror” and, as a verb, “reign supreme.”

since This word may relate either to time (since last winter) or to causation (since I’m a golfer, I know what “double bogey” means). Some writers erroneously believe that the word relates exclusively to time. But the causal since was a part of the English language before Chaucer wrote in the fourteenth century, and it is useful as a slightly milder way of expressing
causation than because. But where there is any possibility of confusion with the temporal sense, use because.

**stationary; stationery** Stationary describes a state of immobility or of staying in one place (if it’s stationary, paint it). Stationery denotes writing materials (love letters written on perfumed stationery). To remember the two, try associating the -er in stationery with the -er in paper; or remember that a stationer is someone who sells the stuff.

**such** This word, when used to replace this or that—as in “such building was later condemned”—is symptomatic of legalese. Such is actually no more precise than the, this, that, these, or those. It is perfectly acceptable, however, to use such with a mass noun or plural noun when the meaning is “of that type” or “of this kind” (such vitriolic exchanges became commonplace in the following years).

**there; their; they’re** There denotes a place or direction (stay there). Their is the possessive pronoun (all their good wishes). They’re is a contraction of they are (they’re calling now).

**toward; towards** The preferred form is without the -s in American English, with it in British English. The same is true for other directional words, such as upward, downward, forward, and backward, as well as afterward. The use of afterwards and backwards as adverbs is neither rare nor incorrect.

**transcript; transcription** A transcript is a written record, as of a trial or a radio program. Transcription is the act or process of creating a transcript.

**unique** Reserve this word for the sense “one of a kind.” Avoid it in the sense “special, unusual.” Phrases such as very unique, more unique, somewhat unique, and so on—in which a degree is attributed to unique—are poor usage.

**use; usage; utilise** Use is usually the best choice for simplicity. Usage refers to a customary practice. Utilise is usually an overblown alternative of use, but it is occasionally the better choice when the distinct sense is “to use to best effect”.

**verbal; oral** If something is put into words, it is verbal. Technically, verbal covers both written and spoken utterance. But if you wish to specify that something was conveyed through speech, use oral.

**while** While may substitute for although or whereas, especially if a conversational tone is desired (while many readers may disagree, the scientific community has overwhelmingly adopted the conclusions here presented). Yet because while can denote either time or contrast, the word is occasionally ambiguous; when a real ambiguity exists, although or whereas is the better choice.

**who; whom** Here are the traditional rules. Who is a nominative pronoun used as (1) the subject of a finite verb (it was Jim who bought the coffee today) or (2) a predicate nominative when it follows a linking verb (that’s who). Whom is an objective pronoun that may appear as (1) the object of a verb (I learned nothing about the man whom I saw) or (2) the object of a preposition (the woman to whom I owe my life). Today there are two countervailing trends: first, there’s a decided tendency to use who colloquially in most contexts; second, among those insecure about their grammar, there’s a tendency to overcorrect oneself and use whom when who would be correct. Writers and editors of formal prose often resist the first of these; everyone should resist the second.

**whoever; whomever** Avoid the second unless you are certain of your grammar (give this book to whoever wants it) (I cook for whomever I love). If you are uncertain why these examples are correct, use anyone who or (as in the second example) anyone.

**who’s; whose** The first is a contraction (Who’s on first?), the second a possessive (Whose life is it, anyway?). Unlike who and whom, whose may refer to things as well as people (the Commerce Department, whose bailiwick includes intellectual property).
**whomever; whoever's** The first is correct (though increasingly rare) in formal writing (whomever bag that is, it needs to be moved out of the way); the second is acceptable in casual usage (whoever’s dog got into our garbage can, he or she should clean up the mess).

**wrong; wrongful** These terms are not interchangeable. *Wrong* has two senses: (1) “immoral, unlawful” (it’s wrong to bully smaller children) and (2) “improper, incorrect, unsatisfactory” (the math answers are wrong). *Wrongful* likewise has two senses: (1) “unjust, unfair” (wrongful conduct) and (2) “unsanctioned by law; having no legal right” (it was a wrongful demand on the estate).

**your; you’re** *Your* is the possessive form of *you*. *You’re* is the contraction for *you are*. 